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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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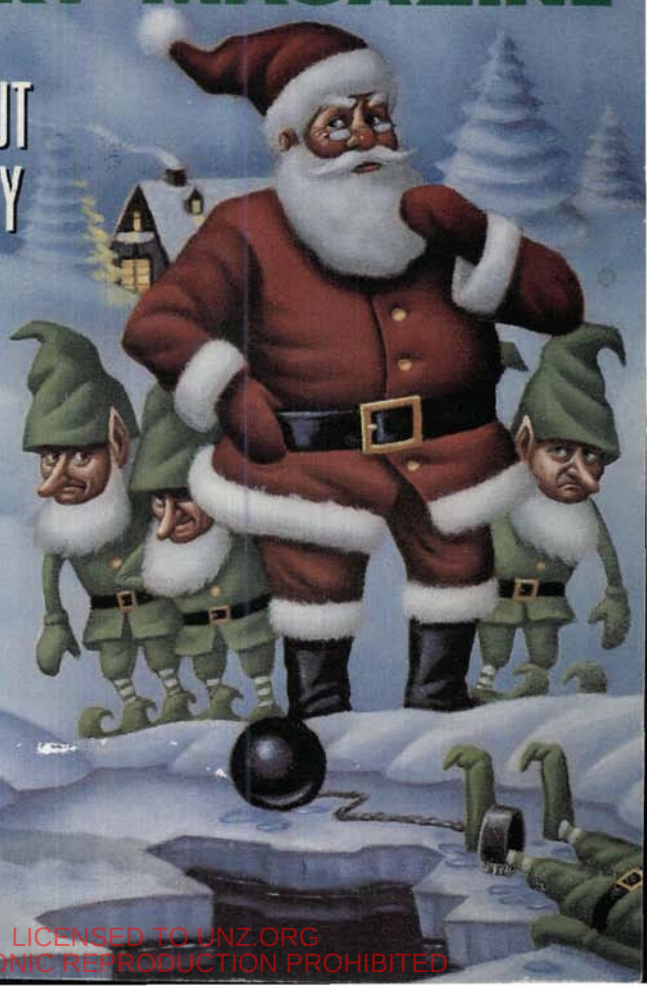

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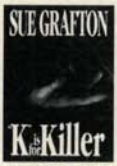

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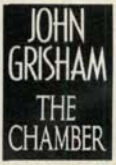

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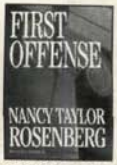

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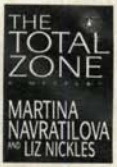

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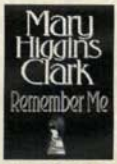

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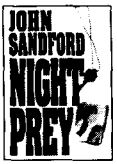

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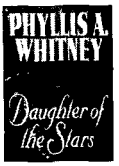

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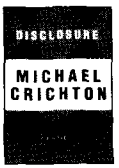

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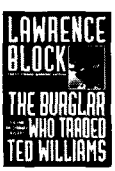

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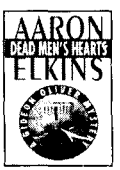

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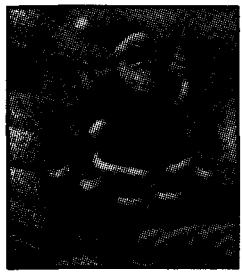

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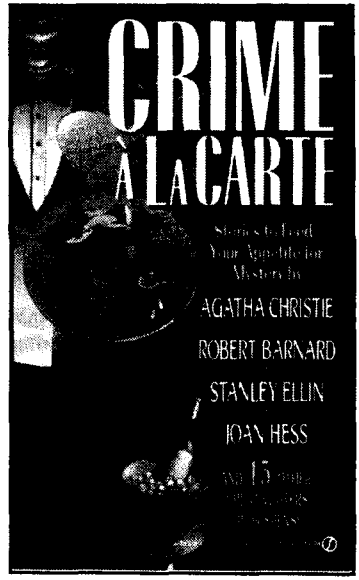

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

To his many credits as an author, Peter Lovesey has recently added an editorial feather, joining with authors Michael Z. Lewin and Liza Cody to bring out the latest anthology of the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain, Third Culprit. *His new novel,* The Summons, *will be published in the United States by Mysterious Press in October of 1995 . . .*

PASS THE PARCEL

by PETER LOVESEY

The roads were treacherous on Christmas Day and Andy and Gemma took longer than they expected to drive the twenty-five miles to Stowmarket. While Gemma concentrated on keeping the car from skidding, Andy complained about the party in prospect. "You and I must be crazy doing this. I mean, what are we putting our lives at risk for? Infantile games that your sister insists on playing simply because in her tiny mind that's the only permissible way of celebrating. The food isn't anything special. If Pauline produces those enormous cheese straws with red streaks like varicose veins, I'll throw up, I promise you. All over the chocolate log."

Gemma said, "We're not going for the food."

"The games?"

"The family."

"Your brother Reg, you mean? The insufferable Reg? I can't wait to applaud his latest stunt. What's he planning for this year, would you say? A stripogram? Or a police raid? He's a real bunch of laughs, is Reg."

Gemma negotiated a sharp bend and said, "Will you shut up about Reg? There are others in my family."

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"Of course. There's Geoff. He'll be sitting in the most comfortable chair and speaking to nobody."

"Give it a rest, will you?" Gemma said through her teeth.

"I'd like to. They're showing *Apocalypse Now* on BBC2. I'd like to be giving it a rest in front of the telly with a large brandy in my fist."

Andy's grumbling may have been badly timed, but it was not unreasonable. Any fair-minded person would have viewed Christmas with this particular set of in-laws as an infliction. There were four in the current generation of Weavers, all in their thirties now, the sisters Gemma and Pauline and the brothers Reg and Geoff. Pauline, the hostess, eight years Gemma's junior, was divorced. She would have been devastated if the family had spent Christmas anywhere else but in Chestnut Lodge, the mansion she had occupied with her former husband and kept as her share of the settlement. No one risked devastating Pauline. As the youngest, she demanded and received everybody's cooperation.

"I could endure the food if it wasn't for the games," Andy started up again. "Why do we put up with them? Why not something intelligent instead of charades and—God help us—pass the parcel? I know, you're going to tell me it's a tradition in the family, but we don't have to be lumbered with traditions forevermore just because sweet little Pauline likes playing the games she did when she was a kid. She's thirty-one now, for Christ's sake. Does she sleep with a teddy bear?"

When they reached Stowmarket and swung left, Andy decently dipped into his reserve of bonhomie. "They probably dread it as much as we do, poor sods. Let's do our best to be convivial. You did bring the brandy?"

"On the backseat with the presents," said Gemma.

Chestnut Lodge had been built about 1840 for a surgeon. Not much had been done to the exterior since. The stonework wanted cleaning and there were weeds growing through the gravel drive.

Someone had left a parcel the size of a shoebox on the doorstep. Andy picked it up and carried it in with their presents.

"So sorry, darling," Gemma told Pauline. "The roads were like a rink in places. Are we the last?"

"No, Reg isn't here yet."

"Wanting to make the usual grand entrance?"

"Probably."

"You're wearing your pearls. And what a gorgeous dress."

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Pauline always wore something in pink or yellow with layers of net. She was in competition with the fairy on the tree, according to Andy.

She smiled her thanks for the compliment. "Not very practical for the time of year, but I couldn't resist it. Let's take your coats. And Happy Christmas."

"First I'll park these under the tree," said Andy. "The brown paper one isn't from us, by the way. We found it on your doorstep. Doesn't feel heavy enough for booze, more's the pity."

"I do like surprises," said Pauline.

"A secret admirer?" said Gemma.

"At my age?"

"Oh, come on, what does that say for me, pushing forty?"

"You've got your admirer."

Gemma rolled her eyes upwards and said nothing.

"Come and say hello to Geoff." Pauline cupped her hand to her mouth as she added, "Hasn't had any work for three months, he told me."

"Oh, no."

Their accountant brother, short and fat, with half-glasses, greeted Gemma. "Merry Christmas" was likely to be the extent of his conversation for the day unless someone asked him about his garden.

Pauline brought in a tray of tea things.

Andy said, "Not for me, I'll help myself to a brandy, if you don't mind. Want one, Geoff?"

Geoff shook his head.

"Any trouble getting here?"

Geoff gave a shrug.

"Roads okay your way, then?"

Geoff thought about it and gave another shrug.

Pauline said, "It's nearly four. Reg ought to be here. It's not as if he has far to come. Geoff has a longer trip and he was here by three-thirty."

"Knowing Reg of old, he could be planning one of his stunts," said Andy. "Remember the year of the ghost in the bathroom, Pauline?"

"Don't!" she said. "Will I ever forget it? It was so real, and he *knew* I was scared of living here alone."

Between them, they recalled Reg's party tricks in recent years: the time he arrived with his friend masquerading as an African bishop; the year the Queen's voice came out of the cocktail cabinet; and the live turkey in Geoff's car.

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"You've got to give him full marks for trying," said Andy. "It would be a dull old Christmas without him."

"I'd rather have it dull," said Pauline.

"Me, too," said Gemma. "I may be his flesh and blood, but I don't share his sense of humour."

"Only because it could be your turn this time," said Andy. "Poor old Geoff got it last year. The sight of that turkey pecking your hand when you opened the door, Geoff. I'll never forget."

Geoff stared back without smiling.

Ten minutes later, Pauline said, "I've had the cocktail sausages warming for over an hour. They'll be burnt to a cinder. And we haven't even opened a single present."

"Want me to phone him, see if he's left?" Andy offered.

"Of course he's left," said Gemma. "He must have."

Pauline started to say, "I hope nothing's—"

Gemma said quickly, "He's all right. He wants to keep us in suspense. We're playing into his hands. I think we should get on with the party without him. Why don't we open some presents?"

"I think we ought to wait for Reg."

"You could open the one we found on the doorstep," Andy suggested to Pauline.

"Unless it *is* something personal," said Gemma.

That induced a change of mind from Pauline. "I've got nothing to hide from any of you."

Andy retrieved the parcel from under the tree, turned it over, and examined the brown paper wrapping. "There's nothing written on it. Maybe it isn't meant for Pauline after all."

"If it was left on her doorstep, it's hers," said Gemma.

Pauline sat in a chair with the parcel deep in the froth of her skirt and picked at the Sellotape. She was too fastidious to tear the paper.

"You want scissors," said Andy.

"I can manage." She eased open the brown paper. "It's gift-wrapped inside."

"Where's the tag?" said Gemma. "Who's it from?"

"There isn't one." Pauline examined the tinsel-tied parcel in its shiny red wrapper.

"Open it, then."

She worked at one edge of the paper with one of her long, lacquered fingernails. "Look, there's more wrapping inside."

"Just like pass the parcel," said Gemma.

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Andy gave his wife a murderous look.

The paper yielded to Pauline's gentle probing. Underneath was yet another wrapping, with a design of holly and Christmas roses. She said, "I think you're right. This is meant for a game."

Andy swore under his breath.

"Let's all play, then," said Gemma with an amused glance at her husband's reaction.

"After tea."

"No, now. While we're waiting for Reg. Pull up a chair everyone and sit in a circle. I'll look after the music."

"Just three of us?" said Andy.

Gemma mocked him with a look. "You know how Pauline adores this game."

Andy and Pauline positioned themselves close to where Geoff was already seated, while Gemma selected a CD and placed it on the deck of the music center.

"What is it—'The Teddy Bears' Picnic?' " said Andy.

Pauline was impervious to sarcasm. "'Destiny,' " she said as the sound of strings filled the room.

"That's an old one."

"Start passing it, then," said Gemma. "I'm not playing this for my amusement."

Pauline handed the parcel to Andy, who held it to his chest. "No cheating," said Pauline.

He passed it to Geoff and the music stopped. Geoff unwrapped a piece of pink paper and revealed a silver layer beneath.

"Tough," said Andy. "Play on, maestro."

As the game resumed, Pauline told her sister, "You're supposed to have your back to us. It isn't fair if you can see who the parcel has reached."

"She likes playing God," said Andy. "Whoops." The music had stopped and the parcel was on his lap. He ripped it open; no finer feelings. "Too bad. Give it another whirl, Gem."

Geoff was the next to remove a layer. He did it in silence as usual.

"More music?" said Gemma.

"You got it," said Andy.

Three more wrappings came off before Pauline got a turn. The parcel was appreciably smaller.

"This could be it," said Andy. "You can see the shape."

"But of what?" said Pauline. "It looks like a box to me." She was pink in the face as she peeled back the paper, but it was clear that another burst of music would be necessary.

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When Andy received the parcel he held it to his ear and gave it a shake. Nothing rattled.

"Come on, pass it," said Pauline, drumming her shoes on the carpet.

Geoff fumbled and dropped the parcel as the music stopped. Pauline snatched it up.

"Not so fast," said Andy. "Geoff hadn't passed it to you."

But she had already unfolded the tissue paper from around a matchbox, one of the jumbo size capable of holding two hundred and fifty matches.

"One more round, apparently," said Gemma, and she turned up the music again. To sustain the suspense, a longer stretch of "Destiny" was wanted.

"What could it be?" said Pauline.

"Matches," said Andy.

"A silk scarf would be nice," said Pauline.

"Game on," said Gemma.

The matchbox was sent on its way around the three players.

"No looking," Andy reminded his wife. "We're down to the wire now. This has to be impartial."

"Faster," said Pauline.

"She's a goer, your sister," said Andy.

The matchbox fairly raced from lap to lap.

"Do you mind? I didn't know you cared," said Andy when Pauline's impetuous hand clasped his thigh.

Even Geoff was leaning forward, absorbed in the climax of the game. The music stopped just as he was passing the box to Pauline. They both had their hands on it.

"Mine," she said.

Geoff apparently knew better than to thwart his younger sister.

"I suppose it's only justice that you get the prize, as it was left on your doorstep," said Andy. "Let's see what you've got."

Unable to contain her curiosity, Gemma came over to see.

Pauline slid the box half-open, dropped it into her lap, and said in horror, "Oh, I don't believe it!"

"It's a joke," said Gemma. "It must be a joke."

"It isn't," said Pauline in a thin, strained voice. "That's somebody's thumb. Ugh!" She hooked the box off her skirt as if it were alive and dropped it on the coffee table.

Large and pale, the offending digit lay on a bed of cotton wool.

"No it isn't," said Andy. "It's too big for a thumb. It's a big toe."

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"A toe?"

"Yes, it's too fleshy for a thumb."

"It must be out of a joke shop," said Gemma. "If Reg is responsible for this, I'll strangle him."

"Typical of his humour," said Andy.

Then Geoff spoke. "I think it's real."

"It *can't* be," said Gemma.

"Open it right out," said Andy.

"I'm not touching it," said Pauline.

Andy lifted the box and opened it, separating the drawer from its casing.

"I can't bear to look," said Pauline. "Keep it away from me."

"It's the real thing," said Andy. "You can see where it was—"

"God in Heaven—we don't wish to see," said Gemma. "Put it somewhere out of sight and give Pauline some of that brandy we brought."

"What a vile trick," said Pauline.

Andy reunited the two sections of the matchbox and placed it on a bookshelf before going to the brandy bottle. "Anybody else want some Dutch courage?"

Geoff gave a nod.

Andy's hand shook as he poured. Everyone was in a state of shock.

"He's gone too far this time," said Gemma. "He's ruined Christmas for all of us. I shall tell him. Are you all right, love?"

Pauline took a gulp of brandy and gave a nod.

"It's ghoulish," said Gemma.

"Sick," said Andy. "You all right, Geoff? You've gone very pale."

"I'm okay," Geoff managed to say.

"Drink some brandy, mate."

Gemma said, "Andy, would you take it right out of the room and get rid of it? It's upsetting us all."

Andy picked the matchbox off the bookshelf and left the room. Gemma collected the discarded sheets of wrapping paper and joined him in the kitchen. "Where would Reg have got such a ghoulish thing?" she whispered.

Andy shrugged. "Who knows? I don't imagine a branch manager at the Midland Bank comes across many severed toes."

"What are we going to do? Pauline's nerves are shattered and Geoff looks ready to faint."

"A fresh cup of tea is supposed to be good for shock. What am I going to do with this?"

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"I don't know. Bury it in the garden."

"Pauline is sure to ask where it went."

"Then we'd better take it with us when we go. We can dump it somewhere on the way home."

"Why should we have to deal with it?" said Andy. "I'll give it back to bloody Reg. He can get rid of it."

"If he has the gall to show his face here. Just keep it out of everyone's sight in the meantime."

To satisfy himself that the toe really was of human origin, Andy slid open the matchbox again. This time he noticed a folded piece of paper tucked into one end. "Hey, there's something inside. I think it's a note." After reading the typed message, he handed it to Gemma. "What do you make of that?"

She stared at the paper. "It can't be true. It's got to be a hoax."

They joined Pauline and Geoff in the living room. "We thought you might appreciate some tea," said Gemma.

"You're marvellous," said Pauline. "I should have thought of that."

"Getting over the shock?"

"I think so."

"You too, Geoff?"

Geoff gave a nod.

Andy cleared his throat. "I found this note in the matchbox."

"A note?" said Pauline. "From Reg?"

"Apparently not. It says, 'If you want the rest of your brother—' "

"Oh, no!" said Pauline.

" 'If you want the rest of your brother, bring ten thousand pounds or equivalent to the telephone box at Chilton Leys at five-thirty. Just one of you. If you don't, or if you call the police, you can find the bits all over Suffolk.' "

"Andy, I think she's going to faint."

"I'm all right," said Pauline. "If this is true, that toe . . . "

"But it isn't true," said Andy, spacing the words. "It's Reg having us on, as he does every year."

"Are you sure?"

"He'll turn up presently grinning all over his fat face. The best thing we can do is get on with the party."

There was little enthusiasm for unwrapping presents or eating overcooked sausage, so they turned on the television and watched for a while.

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"How could we possibly put our hands on ten thousand pounds on Christmas Day?" said Pauline during the commercial break.

"That's the giveaway," said Andy. "A professional kidnapper would know better."

"You've got three hundred in notes in your back pocket," said Gemma. "You know you have. You said we needed it over the holiday in case of emergencies."

"Three hundred is peanuts compared to ten grand."

"I've got about a hundred and twenty in my bag," said Gemma.

Geoff took out his wallet and counted the edges of his bank notes.

"Doesn't look as if Geoff can chip in much," said Andy.

Gemma said on a note of reproach, "Andy."

Andy said, "No offence, mate."

Geoff put his wallet away.

"Well, that's it. We couldn't afford to pay the kidnappers if they existed," Andy summed up. "How much do you have in the house, Pauline?"

"In cash? About two hundred."

"Less than eight hundred between us."

"But I've got a thousand in travellers' cheques for my holiday in Florida."

"Still a long way short," said Andy.

"Good thing it's only a hoax," said Gemma.

"There are my pearls," said Pauline, fingering them. "They cost over a thousand. And I have some valuable rings upstairs."

"If we're talking jewellery, Gemma's ruby necklace is the real thing," said Andy.

"So is your Rolex watch," Gemma countered. "And the gold ingot you wear under your shirt."

"I notice you haven't offered your earrings. They cost a bomb, if I remember right."

"Oh, shut up."

"Where the hell is Chilton Leys anyway?"

"Not far," said Pauline.

"I passed it on my way here," said Geoff.

They were silent for an interval. Then Andy said, "Well, has anyone spoken to Reg on the phone in the past twenty-four hours?"

"It must be a week since we spoke," said Pauline.

"What time is it?" asked Gemma.

"Five past five."

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"He would have been here by now," said Pauline. "Or if he had trouble with the car he would have phoned."

"Anyone care for another drink?" asked Andy.

"How many is that you've had already?" said Gemma.

"I want to say something," said Pauline.

"Feel free," said Andy, with the bottle in his hand.

She smoothed her skirt. "I'm not saying you're wrong, but if it wasn't a hoax and Reg really had been kidnapped, we could never forgive ourselves if these people murdered him because we did nothing about it."

"Come off it," said Andy.

"I mean, why are we refusing to respond to the note? Is it because we're afraid of making fools of ourselves? Is that all it is?"

"We don't believe it, that's why," said Gemma.

"You mean you don't want to run the risk of Reg having the last laugh? It's all about self-esteem, isn't it? How typical of our family—all inflated egos. We'd rather run the risk of Reg being murdered than lay ourselves open to ridicule."

"That isn't the point," said Andy. "We're calling his bluff."

"So you say. And if by some freak of circumstance you're mistaken, how will any of us live with it for the rest of our lives? I'm telling you, Andy, I'm frightened. I know what you're thinking. I can see it in your eyes. I'm gullible, a stupid, immature female. Well I don't mind admitting I'm bloody frightened. If none of you wants to take this seriously that's up to you. I do. I'm going to put all the money I have into a bag and take it to that phone box. If nobody comes, what have I lost? Some dignity, that's all. You can laugh at me every Christmas from now on. But I mean it." She stood up.

"Hold on," said Andy. "We've heard what you think. What about the rest of us?"

"It isn't quite the same for you, is it?" said Pauline. "He's my brother."

"He's Gemma's brother, too. And Geoff's."

Andy switched to his wife. "What do *you* want to do about it?"

Gemma hesitated.

"Or Geoff," said Andy. "Do you have an opinion, Geoff?"

Geoff's hand went to his collar as if it had tightened suddenly.

Gemma said, "Pauline is right. Ten to one it's Reg having us on, but we can't take the risk. We've got to do something."

Geoff nodded. He backed his sisters.

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Pauline said, "I'm going upstairs to collect my jewellery, such as it is. We pool everything we have, right?"

"Right," said Gemma, unfixing her gold earrings and turning to Andy. "Do you want to be a part of this, or not?"

Andy slapped his wad of bank notes on the table. "I don't believe in these kidnappers anyway."

"Let's have your watch, then," said Gemma. "And the ingot."

Geoff took out his wallet and emptied it.

The heap of money and valuables markedly increased when Pauline returned. She'd found some family heirlooms, including their grandmother's diamond-studded choker, worth several thousand alone. With her own pieces and the travellers' cheques, the collection must have come close to the value demanded in the note. She scooped everything into a denim bag with bamboo handles and said, "I'll get my coat."

Gemma told her, "Not you, sweetie. That's a job for one of the men."

Andy said, "Give the bag to me."

"You're not going anywhere," said Gemma. "You're way over the limit with all the brandy you've had. Besides, you don't know the way."

They turned to look at Geoff. He knew the way. He had said so.

"I'll go," he said, rising quite positively from the armchair. He looked a trifle unsteady in the upright position, but he'd been seated a long time. Maybe the brandy hadn't gone to his head. He had certainly drunk less than Andy.

Gemma still felt it necessary to ask, "Will you be all right?"

Geoff nodded. He had spoken. There was no need for more words.

Pauline asked, "Would you like me to come?"

Andy said, "The instruction was clear. If you believe it, Geoff's got to go alone."

In the hall, Pauline helped Geoff on with his padded jacket. "If you see anyone, don't take them on, will you? We just want you and Reg safely back."

Geoff looked incapable of taking anyone on as he shuffled across the gravel to his old Cortina, watched from the door by the others. He placed the bag on the passenger seat and got in.

"Is he sober?" Gemma asked.

"He only had a couple," said Andy.

"He looked just the same when he arrived," said Pauline. "He's had a hard time lately. So many businesses going bust. They don't need accountants."

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Gemma said, "If anything happened to him just because Reg is acting the fool, I'd commit murder, I don't mind saying."

They heard the car start up and watched it trundle up the drive.

When the front door was closed again, Gemma asked, "What time is it?"

"Twenty past," said Pauline. "He should just about make it."

Andy said, "I don't know why you two are taking this seriously. If I believed for a moment it was a genuine ransom demand I wouldn't have parted with three hundred pounds and a Rolex, I assure you."

"So what would you have done, cleverclogs?" said Gemma.

This wrongfooted Andy. He spread his hands wide as if the answer were too obvious to go into.

"Let's hear it," said Gemma. "Would you have called the police and put my brother's life at risk?"

"Certainly I'd have called them," said Andy, recovering his poise. "They have procedures for this sort of emergency. They'd know how to handle it without putting anyone's life at risk."

"For example?"

"Well, they'd observe the pickup from a distance. Probably they'd attach some tiny bugging device to the goods being handed over. They might coat some of the banknotes with a dye that responds to ultraviolet light."

Gemma turned to Pauline. "I'm wondering if we should call them."

Andy said, "It's too late. The police would have no option but to come down like a ton of bricks. Someone would get hurt."

Pauline said, "Oh God, no. Let's wait and see what happens."

"We won't have long to wait. That's one thing," said Andy. "You don't mind if I switch on the telly, Pauline?"

They sat in silence watching a cartoon film about a snowman.

Before it finished, Pauline went to the window and pulled back the curtain to look along the drive.

"See anything?" asked Gemma.

"No."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Twenty-five minutes. Chilton Leys is only ten minutes from here, if that. He ought to be back by now."

"Stop fussing, you two," said Andy. "You give me the creeps."

Just after six, Pauline announced, "A car's coming. I can see the headlights."

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"Okay," said Andy from his armchair. "What are we going to do about Reg when he pisses himself laughing and says it was a hoax?"

Pauline ran to the front door and opened it. Gemma was at her side.

"That isn't Geoff's Cortina," said Gemma. "It's a bigger car."

Without appearing to hurry, Andy joined them at the door. "That's Reg's Volvo. Didn't I tell you he was all right?"

The car drew up beside Andy's and Reg got out, smiling. He was alone. "Where's the red carpet, then?" he called out. "Merry Christmas, everyone. Wait a mo. I've got some prezzies in the back." He dipped into his car again.

"You'd think nothing had happened," muttered Gemma.

Laden with presents, Reg strutted towards them. "Who gets to kiss me first, then?" He appeared unfazed, his well-known ebullient self.

Andy remarked, "He's walking normally. We've been suckered."

Gemma said, "You bastard, Reg. Don't come near me, you sadist."

Pauline shouted, "Dickhead."

Reg's face was a study in bewilderment.

Andy said, "Where's Geoff?"

"How would I know?" answered Reg. "Hey, what is this? What am I supposed to have done?"

"Pull the other one, matey," said Andy.

"You've ruined Christmas for all of us," said Pauline, succumbing to tears.

"I wish I knew what you were on about," said Reg. "Shall we go inside and find out?"

"You're not welcome," Pauline whimpered.

"Okay, okay," said Reg. "It's a fair cop and I deserve it after all the stunts I pulled. Who thought of unloading all this on me? Andy, I bet."

Suddenly Gemma said in a hollow voice, "Andy, I don't think he knows what this is about."

"What?"

"I know my own brother. He isn't bluffing. He didn't expect this. Listen, Reg, did anyone kidnap you?"

"*Kidnap* me?"

"We'd better go inside, all of us," said Gemma.

"Kidnap me?" repeated Reg, when they were in Pauline's living room. "I'm gobsmacked."

Pauline said, "Andy found this parcel on my doorstep and—"

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"Shut up a minute," said Andy. "You're playing into his hands. Let's hear his story before we tell him what happened here. You've got some answering to do, Reg. For a start, you're a couple of hours late."

Reg frowned. "You haven't been here all afternoon?"

"Of course we have. We were here by four o'clock."

"You didn't get the message, then?"

"What message?"

"I've been had, then. Geoff phoned at lunchtime to say that Pauline's heating was off. A problem with the boiler. He said the party had been relocated to his place at five."

Pauline said, "There's nothing wrong with my boiler."

"Shut up and listen," said Gemma.

Reg continued, "I turned up at Geoff's house and there was a note for me attached to the door. Hold on—I should have it here." He felt in his pocket. "Yes, here it is." He handed Gemma an envelope with his name written on it.

She took out the note and read to the others, " 'Caught YOU this year. Now go to Pauline's and see what reception you get.' It's Geoff's handwriting."

"He's a slyboots," said Reg, "but I deserve it. He was pretty annoyed by the turkey episode last year."

"You're not the only victim," said Gemma.

"Were you sent on a wild-goose chase?"

"No. But I think he may have tricked us. He *must* have. He led us to believe you were kidnapped. That's why he went to this trouble to keep you away."

"Crafty old devil."

"He took ten grand off us," said Andy.

"What?"

"He persuaded us to put up a ransom for you."

"Now who are you kidding?"

"It's true," said Gemma. "We put together everything we had, cash, jewellery, family heirlooms, and Geoff went off to deliver it to the kidnappers."

"Strike me pink!"

"And he isn't back yet," said Andy.

Pauline said, "Geoff wouldn't rob his own family."

"Don't count on it," said Reg. "He doesn't give a toss for any of us."

"Geoff?"

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"Did you know he's emigrating?"

"No."

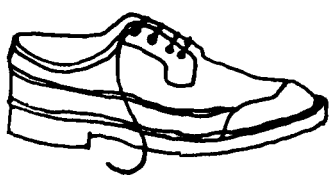
"It's true," said Reg. "He's off to Australia any day now. I picked this up on the grapevine through a colleague in the bank. I think the accident made him reconsider his life plan, so to speak."

"What accident?"

"There you are, you see. I only heard about that from the same source. Old Geoff was in hospital for over a week at the end of September and the last thing he wanted was a visit from any of us."

"A road accident?"

"No, he did it himself. You know how keen he is on the garden. He's got this turfed area sloping down to the pond. He ran the mower over his foot and severed his big toe."



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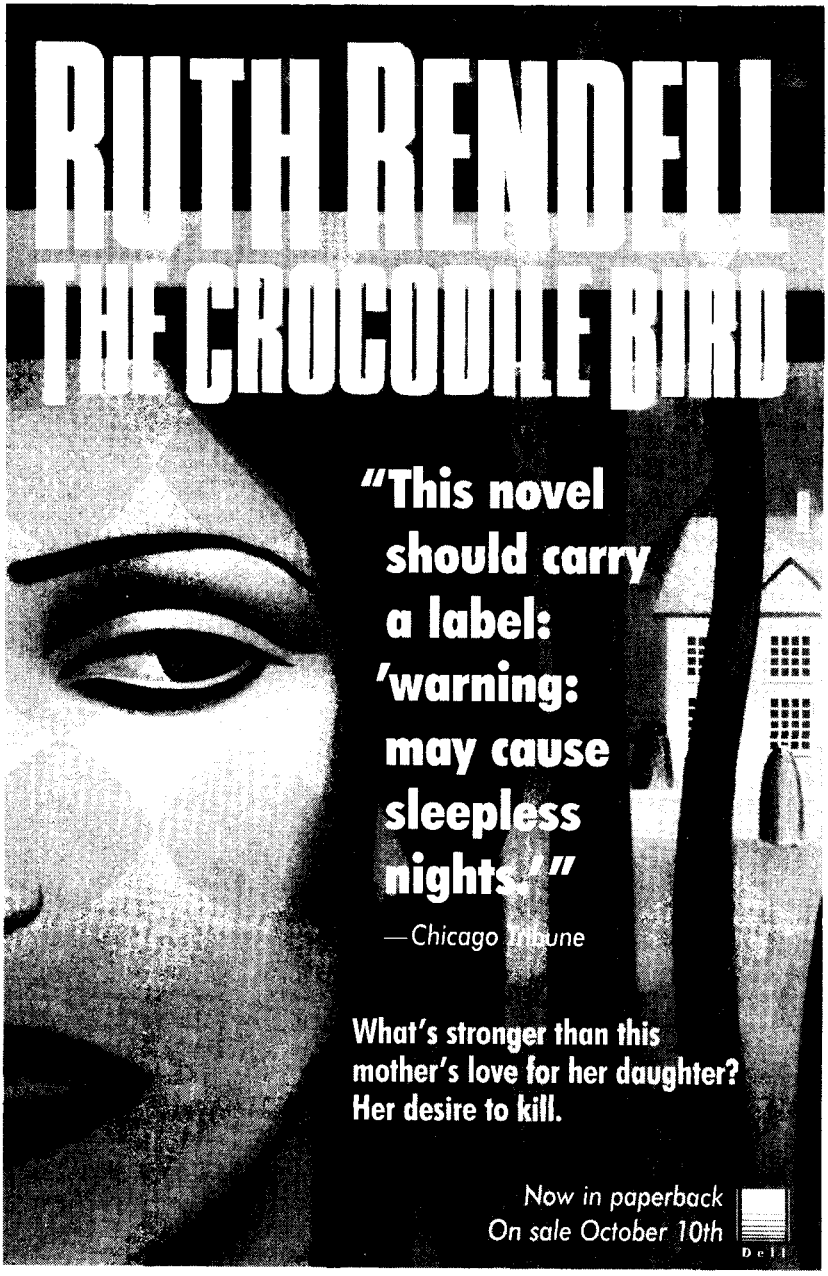
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THE PROBLEM OF THE COUNTRY MAILBOX

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The autumn of '38 (Dr. Sam Hawthorne told his visitor) was a time when the national press was full of Chamberlain and the Munich Pact with Hitler. War was on the horizon, and if it retreated for a time most people realized that was only temporary. It would come, sooner or later, and the streets of Europe would run with blood.

Back home in Northmont, I was concerned with more prosaic matters that autumn. There were vaccinations to give and allergies to treat. We had more doctors practicing in town and there was a steadily growing population. We had not yet seen the boom that would come in the postwar years, but there were signs of change everywhere. A small private college was being built in a neighboring town, with plans to open its doors for the fall semester of 1939. Though that was still a year away, it had encouraged a man named Josh Vernon to open a bookstore in our town.

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Josh's Books was a small store just off the town square. The previous tenant had been a shop selling penny candy out of large glass jars, and I imagined I could still smell the chocolate and licorice when I entered. Josh Vernon was a slender man with a graying moustache and pince-nez glasses that gave him a scholarly demeanor. I couldn't have imagined him as a butcher or baker, but he looked right at home among the bookshelves.

Though he carried a large stock of used books, Vernon also stocked the newest titles from New York and Boston publishers. If he had little space for Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* or Dinesen's *Out of Africa,* it was a place where one could find *Gone With the Wind, The Late George Apley,* and *The Yearling*. He knew what the market wanted and he supplied it.

"It'll be different next year when the college kids start coming around," he told me one day, puffing on his pipe. "If business goes well, I might be able to enlarge the place and carry more literary titles."

I took down a copy of Cronin's *The Citadel* and thumbed through it. I was naturally intrigued by novels about small-town doctors, even if the towns were an ocean away. "Is this any good?" I asked Josh.

"It's popular. I've sold three or four copies."

"I'll take it." I put down a few dollar bills and he wrapped it in his distinctive green paper and twine.

"I been hearing you're pretty good at solving mysteries, Doc. Some say you're better than Sheriff Lens."

"I've been lucky a few times," I admitted.

"I have a mystery that would baffle even you." He tapped his pipe on the ashtray to empty it, then opened his pouch of tobacco. "One of my regular customers is Aaron DeVille out on the Old Ridge Road. You know him, don't you?"

"Slightly. He's not a patient and he rarely comes to town."

The bookseller relit his pipe. "That's certainly true since his wife died. But he loves books. He subscribes to the *Saturday Review of Literature* and every week he phones to order something he's seen in there. I've been open two months and I've probably sold him a dozen books. Says he used to order them from Boston, but I'm a lot closer. Of course, sometimes I don't have the books he wants and I have to order them myself, but quite often I can stop by on my way home and drop them in his mailbox."

"That's what I call service."

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"But here is where the mystery comes in, Doc. Three times now I have left books in his mailbox and they disappeared!"

"Perhaps the postman takes them," I suggested. "They get fussy when mailboxes are used for things other than mail."

"That was my first thought, but the mail is always delivered on that route around one in the afternoon. Kenny Diggins drives along the Old Ridge right after lunch and fills the boxes from his car. I don't close the store till six and it's usually closer to six-thirty when I drop off the books. DeVille is sometimes watching for me. One time he even waved from the front porch. Then he walked out to the box and it was empty."

"Are there any mischievous children who might be sneaking up and stealing the books?" DeVille had a twelve-year-old son.

"I can't see how, at least not in the most recent instance where he was watching the box all the time."

"Maybe you'd better start pulling into the driveway and handing him the books."

"Isn't this the sort of puzzle you like to solve?"

"Well, yes," I admitted. "But I don't see where any serious crime has been committed. If someone is stealing the books—"

"They certainly are!" he insisted. "Could I call you the next time I make a delivery out there? I'd appreciate it if you could figure out what's happening."

"Sure, you can call me. If I'm not involved with a patient I'll try to help."

That seemed to satisfy him and I departed with my book. In the evening when I left the office I detoured on my way home and drove out the Old Ridge Road past Aaron DeVille's house. The mailbox sat on a raised wooden board with three others, inches apart. Each family's name was painted in small neat letters on the side of the box. DeVille's, one of the middle boxes, looked just like all the others.

Sylvia Grant was a bright young woman who worked part-time in Vernon's bookstore. She was in her twenties, with curly blond hair and eyeglasses with thin black frames that gave her face the appealing look of a studious pixie. Two days after my conversation with Josh Vernon I saw her crossing the town square near the bandstand.

"On your way to the bookstore?" I asked.

"Sure am! Want anything today, Dr. Sam?"

"I might walk over with you." I fell in beside her, though until that moment I hadn't thought about going there. "How's business at the store?"

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"Fair. Josh thinks Christmas will be good, if we're not in a war by then."

"We won't be," I said with an assurance I didn't really feel. "Josh was telling me the other day that he's been having trouble delivering books out to Aaron DeVille's place. They keep disappearing out of the mailbox."

"That's what he says. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"You mean you don't believe it?"

Sylvia shrugged. "DeVille's son is probably taking them somehow."

"Damon?"

"He's a bit precocious. He loves to baffle his dad with some sort of mystery."

"Whatever happened certainly seems to have bothered Josh."

"Well, he's the one who's had to replace the missing books. It's costing him money, a few dollars anyway."

"Do you think Aaron DeVille is lying about the books disappearing from his mailbox?"

"What would be his motive? To get a second copy? That doesn't seem likely."

We'd reached the bookstore and Sylvia Grant turned in. I said goodbye and continued on my way. I hadn't given any thought to Josh Vernon's problem since driving past DeVille's mailbox. Whatever the explanation, it wasn't one that particularly concerned me.

Josh phoned the office the following afternoon while I was with a patient. My nurse Mary told him I'd return the call and I felt obliged to do so. "How are you, Josh?" I asked when he answered. "How's the book business today?"

"I've had another order from Aaron DeVille. He wants a copy of *War and Peace*."

"Do you have one?"

"Yes, in the Modern Library edition. I told him I'd bring it out tonight on the way home. He suggested I bring it right to the door, but I want to leave it in the mailbox while you watch and see what happens."

I was convinced nothing would happen while I was watching, but I reluctantly agreed. "I'll stop by the store a little before six," I promised, "when I finish up here."

At five, when I'd seen my last patient, Mary Best came into my office to say she was going home. "You're going over to Josh's bookstore now?"

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"I guess so. Sometimes I think I'm too nice to say no to people."

"Sylvia Grant thinks you're nice."

I chuckled. "You know Sylvia?"

"We go to the movies occasionally. She's very friendly."

"Has she mentioned this book business with Aaron DeVille?"

Mary became occupied with the patient files on her desk. "You mean the books disappearing out of the mailbox? She mentioned it."

"You probably know more about DeVille than I do. Wasn't his wife killed by a truck?"

Mary Best nodded. "Two years ago next week. She was driving Aaron's Ford down the Old Ridge Road when she was broadsided by a truck loaded with pumpkins."

"I remember now. People were talking about the pumpkins rolling all over the road."

"It was funny to some, I suppose, but not to Aaron DeVille and Damon."

"The boy's twelve now. I see him in town sometimes. He would have been ten when it happened."

"That's right. He's a smart lad, very personable for his age."

"What was his mother's name?"

"Rachel. Rachel DeVille."

"A biblical name, like Aaron." I said good night to Mary and went out to my car.

It was only a five-minute drive from my office at the hospital to the center of town. At that time of day I could park right in front of Josh's Books. He was waiting for me by the door, ready to close for the night. "Thanks for coming, Doc."

"Ready to go?"

"I just have to wrap the book."

I followed him over to the counter and thumbed through the pages of Tolstoy's massive novel. "Haven't had to read this since college."

"It hasn't changed much," the bookseller said with a smile. He pulled a couple of feet of his trademark green paper down from the roll, ripped it off, and placed the book in the center. The wrapping took only seconds and he finished it off with a length of matching green twine. "All set!" He handed the book to me. "You bring that, Doc, and we'll be on our way."

"Is DeVille always this classical in his choices of reading matter?"

"No. In fact, the three books that disappeared were all modern novels—Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men,* Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock,* and *Rebecca* by Daphne de Maurier."

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"Maybe you'll have better luck with this one."

I held the book on my lap during the journey out to the DeVille house. Like many of the homes along that stretch of Old Ridge Road, it had once been a farm. As neighboring farms expanded and bought up property, only the old farmhouses remained. The barn on the DeVille property had been torn down long ago, and a storage shed was now used as a garage. The house itself, some two hundred feet back from the road, was in need of painting, but otherwise it seemed in good shape.

Josh Vernon pulled up by the line of mailboxes. As I'd observed before, each name was painted on the side of a box: Chesnut, Millars, DeVille, Breen. "Put it right in the box, Doc. This is your show."

I opened the mailbox and slid the book in. "Shall I put up the little red flag?"

"Better not. The post office could get really upset about that."

I turned to watch the boxes out the rear window as we drove on about fifty feet. Then Vernon stopped the car just beyond a clump of bushes. "Get out and watch. I'll drive on."

"Do you think I'll see someone?"

"DeVille will be out in a minute. I'm sure he saw us."

I got out quickly, still keeping an eye on the mailboxes. No one had approached them. Then, crouching down so I was partly hidden, I waited.

It didn't take long. A stocky man in his late thirties, whom I recognized as Aaron DeVille, came ambling down the driveway from the direction of the house. As he approached the mailbox I had to admit that I would be the most surprised man in the country if that book wasn't still inside.

DeVille paused before his box and opened it. From my viewing angle down the road I saw him pull the green-wrapped book out of the box and slip it into the pocket of his leather jacket. I almost sighed with relief. Josh Vernon had been wrong. This time, at least, the book hadn't vanished.

As he started back up the driveway DeVille seemed to have second thoughts about the book. He removed it from his pocket, untied the string, and ripped off the paper. I saw him start to open the cover. There was a terrible flash and a sound like a clap of thunder.

I broke from the cover of the bush and ran toward him, knowing even as I ran that Aaron DeVille was beyond the help of a doctor.

* * *

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Sheriff Lens had been trying to lose weight that autumn, and it hadn't improved his disposition. He left it to his deputies to clean up what was left of Aaron DeVille while he questioned Josh Vernon and me. "You're telling me, Doc, that you were watchin' that mailbox the whole time and nobody came near it?"

"That's what I'm telling you, Sheriff."

He turned to Vernon, who was standing there pale and shaken. "There was a bomb inside that book you delivered, Josh. Looks to me like you're the only one who coulda put it there."

"But I couldn't have, Sheriff! Dr. Sam was with me when I wrapped it. I think he even flipped through the pages."

"That's right," I confirmed with some reluctance.

"He even held the book on his lap during the ride out here. It was never out of his sight."

Sheriff Lens looked at me with a sour expression. "That right, Doc?"

"I'm afraid so."

A few neighbors had been attracted by the explosion, and it was Marta Chesnut from across the road who said suddenly, "What about young Damon? He must still be at his piano lessons!"

Sheriff Lens scowled at her. "Could you go pick him up, Marta? I'll have my deputy drive you."

"Of course," she replied without hesitation.

While we waited for Damon's return the sheriff questioned the other neighbors, Millars and Breen, without learning anything. The three families occupied a trio of small cottage-type houses across the road from the DeVille home. The plots of land had been carved out of another piece of the DeVille farm when it was sold off by Aaron's father. They'd been having dinner when they heard the sound of the explosion and came running.

Sheriff Lens finished with them and came back to me. "What do you think, Doc?"

"I don't want to say, not quite yet."

"There was that case a few years back, the Fourth of July murder, when a firecracker had a stick of dynamite in it—"

"A different thing entirely. In that case the killer was nearby. No one was anywhere near Aaron DeVille. No one but me."

Our conversation was interrupted by the return of the sheriff's car carrying Mrs. Chesnut and the DeVille boy. It was obvious that she'd broken the news to him en route. He emerged crying from the car, clinging to her as she hurried him across the road to her house.

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"I think it's better if he stays with us tonight," Marta Chesnut explained to the sheriff. "He says there's an aunt in Hartford who should be contacted."

"We'll take care of it," Sheriff Lens assured her. "Could I just have a few words with him?"

"I think later would be better. He's had a terrible shock." Her husband had taken young Damon inside and she followed him.

"We'd better have a look inside the house," the sheriff said. "DeVille left the door open when he came out for the book."

I glanced at Josh Vernon, who'd been standing off to one side without speaking through all of this. "If you want to go along home, I'm sure the sheriff would give me a ride back."

He seemed reluctant to leave without permission from Sheriff Lens, who quickly gave it. "I know where to find you, Josh. Get along now and I'll drop by the store in the morning."

"Thanks, Sheriff." He trotted off to where he'd left the car, down the road.

"What do you think, Doc?" Lens asked again, patting his belly as if gauging the success of his weight reduction.

"Honestly?" I watched Josh's car drive away. "I think he suckered me somehow into delivering a book with a bomb in it, but for the life of me I can't figure out how he could have done it."

The inside of the house had the look of a bachelor's quarters. There was a bottle of bourbon on the coffee table along with a half-empty glass. A wall rack held three hunting rifles. And on either side of the stone fireplace were shelves of books, filled to overflowing. A pair of reading glasses was on the table next to the whiskey glass. The shelves were dusty and the windows dirty. The grass in the yard had been recently cut, but that only proved DeVille had a son to cut it. My eyes ranged over fiction, poetry, and books on building, hunting, guns, and explosives.

"What did DeVille do for a living?" I asked.

"Construction work, but lately he's been off. He got a settlement from the trucking company that killed his wife. He's been living off that."

I could see evidence of Rachel DeVille still present in the framed picture of smiling mother, father, and son on the mantel, and books like *Little Women* that still found a place on the shelves. I took it down and found her maiden name still on the leaflet—Rachel March.

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No wonder she was attracted to the Alcott novel, sharing the same last name as the book's family.

The kitchen showed signs of meal preparation, and the beds upstairs were unmade. The basement had the typical dirt floor of most farmhouses, with shelves holding a few jars of peaches and tomatoes no doubt left over from Rachel's time. Aaron had a work table in one corner with equipment for loading his own hunting cartridges. Sheriff Lens ran his finger over a container of gunpowder. "Everything's dusty. He hasn't been down here in a long time."

"Two years," I suggested, pointing out the hunting licenses tacked to the wall above the table. "The last one's thirty-six, the year his wife was killed. Looks like he lost interest in hunting after that." There were some old newspapers at the bottom of the stairs, dating back just a few months, that he or the boy must have brought down. A mousetrap sat under the steps, its bait moldy and its trap unsprung. I wondered if anyone, even a mouse, had spent time down there in the last two years.

We went back outside where the deputies were cleaning away the last evidence of the explosion. "We want to have it decent before the kid comes back," the sheriff said.

"What about the book and the wrapping?" I asked.

"All burned up except for a few charred pieces for the lab to check."

I bent to retrieve a piece of burned newspaper. " . . . *sevelt Nominated by Acclaim* . . . " The rest of it was gone, blown away like Aaron DeVille.

"Before I can take you home, Doc, I'd like you to come with me and see if we can speak with young Damon."

"Of course."

It was starting to get dark as we crossed the road to the Chesnut house. Marta Chesnut answered the door. She glanced over her shoulder and said, "Come in. He's pretty good now."

Damon was a sandy-haired boy who seemed a bit thin and short for his age. Not surprisingly, his eyes were red from crying and he faced us now with a trembling lip. Sheriff Lens said a few words to relax him and then asked, "When did you last see your father, Damon?"

"This—this afternoon. I left for school at my usual time, about eight-thirty. I came home around three-thirty to pick up my music, and later my dad drove me to the piano lesson. He was supposed to pick me up at six-thirty but he never came. Mrs. Chesnut—"

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"We know, son. That's all right."

I sat down next to him. "Damon, you know me, don't you? I'm Dr. Hawthorne. I know these questions are difficult, but we're just trying to learn what happened to your dad." He'd lost both his mother and father within two years and in his eyes I could see a desperate plea for help.

"Did someone kill him?" Damon asked.

"We think so. Was anyone at the house this afternoon when you came home? Anyone who might have fooled with the books?"

"No. When Mom was alive I could never touch the books, and Dad was still fussy about people handling them."

"Were there any recent visitors?"

He glanced away. "Not while I was there."

I wondered what that meant but decided not to pursue it at the moment. "What about the mail?" I asked instead. "Did your dad bring it in every day?"

"I guess so, yeah. I always looked in the box when I got home but it was usually empty."

"You looked even if the flag wasn't up?"

"Sure," he said with a shrug.

I looked up at Marta Chesnut. "You can take care of him overnight?"

"Of course." Her blue eyes sparkled. "We're planning to."

"I'll be out again in the morning," I promised.

Riding back to town with Sheriff Lens, I pondered the mailbox problem. "I think I should talk with Kenny Diggins tomorrow."

"The postman?"

"Yeah. There was a bomb in that book. Either Vernon switched packages on me somehow or it was done in the mailbox."

"You told me you were watching it the whole time."

"I was. Right now I don't know which of my alternatives is the more impossible."

I went out to the Chesnut house in the morning and talked to Damon again. He was doing pretty well and Marta told me his aunt and uncle would be arriving later that afternoon. They would stay for the funeral and then take the boy back to Hartford with them.

"Did he sleep all right?" I asked Marta when we were alone.

"I don't know. He was up roaming around some. I heard him go outside once, over to his house, but he wasn't gone long. I suppose he wanted to convince himself it wasn't all a terrible dream."

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I went outside and crossed the road myself, stopping to examine the mailboxes closely for the first time. All four had been bolted to the stout board that supported them. The boxes on either end, for Chesnut and Breen, were beginning to work loose, but the middle two, for DeVille and Millars, were tightly bolted in place. Since three of the boxes were for houses across the road I wondered why DeVille's box was the second in line rather than being at one end or the other. It was already afternoon, so I decided to wait for Kenny to bring the day's mail.

Just before one I spotted his Chevy coming over the hill, stopping at each roadside mailbox to make a delivery and lift the flag. I walked out and hailed him as he reached the boxes in front of the DeVille house. "Hi, Doc," he greeted me. "What's this I heard about Aaron DeVille?"

"Someone put a bomb in his mailbox."

The postman stared at the box as if unable to believe such a thing, then gradually opened it to peer carefully inside. "It's against the law to put anything but mail into these boxes."

"Especially bombs," I pointed out.

"Yeah." He scratched his head. "I heard Josh Vernon was delivering a book to him. You know, that Vernon is always putting things in the mailboxes that he's not supposed to."

"Ever see anyone else doing it?"

He thought about it. "Just kids once in a while. If I catch them I give 'em a good scolding." As he spoke he was slipping mail into the boxes. He put a few bills and the *Saturday Review of Literature* in DeVille's box.

"He's dead," I reminded him.

"I go by the book, Doc. Nobody's notified the post office to stop delivery."

"Tell me something, Kenny. How come the DeVille mailbox is second in the row instead of at the end? The other houses are all across the street."

"That's easy. DeVille was always here. Then they built the Chesnut house and their box went next to his. When the other two families moved in a few years later, their boxes went on the other side of DeVille. I guess they just put 'em there for no special reason."

As he drove on I noticed another car coming over the hill. It was traveling fast, raising a cloud of dust behind it. When the driver saw me he pulled to a stop. "You Sheriff Lens?" he asked. He was in his mid-thirties, dressed for the city in suit and tie and hat. The

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woman next to him wore a plain black dress and hat.

"No, I'm Dr. Sam Hawthorne. You'd be the DeVille family from Hartford?"

"That's correct. They phoned about my brother—"

"A terrible tragedy. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"The boy—Damon?"

"Staying with neighbors across the street. Pull into the driveway and we'll walk over."

It was the woman, Florence, who hurried to the boy. Zach DeVille hung back as if unsure of himself. "We'll give him a good home, of course," he tried to reassure me.

"Were you close to your brother?"

"Not really. He was five years older: the first, as you probably gathered from his name. I was the last. Our folks did things like that."

He said a few words to his nephew and then left him in his wife's care. "Would you like to see the house?" I asked.

"I suppose I should. Florence and I will get the job of cleaning it out and selling it. And we'll be staying there till the funeral."

"Aaron had no other relatives?"

"None."

I went back to the Chesnut house and got the key from Marta. Then Zach DeVille and I went in. "Sorry about the liquor bottle. The deputies didn't bother cleaning up."

"I've seen plenty of them before around Aaron."

"What was he like when he drank?"

"Miserable to Rachel when she was alive. Gave her a black eye once. She called me long distance that night and I had to talk to him."

"What about the night she died?"

"I think she was running away from him, but what difference does it make? Her death was clearly an accident. There was nothing anyone could do to Aaron."

"Somebody did something to him. They blew him away."

Zach DeVille glanced around the room and shrugged. "Maybe he found another woman, one who didn't like being pushed around."

I thought about that as we walked back over to the Chesnut house. When Zach and Florence took Damon back home I asked Marta if I could have a word with her outside. "What is it?" she asked.

"Your front window is right across the road from the DeVille house. You must have noticed his comings and goings, things like visitors."

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"He didn't have many visitors."

"Young Damon hinted there might have been someone."

"Oh, there was that woman from town. She came out occasionally. Damon probably didn't like her."

"What woman from town?"

"The one who works at Vernon's bookstore. I think her name is Sylvia."

I had no patients scheduled the following morning so I dropped by the sheriff's office early. Sheriff Lens was pondering the report from the state police laboratory, where he'd sent the charred remains of the bomb. "You might find this interesting, Doc," he said as he passed the report to me. "It's only preliminary. They got more tests to run."

I glanced over the pages. "A mousetrap?"

"A mousetrap set to go off when the book's cover was opened. That in turn set off a detonator and exploded a charge of gunpowder. The whole thing was packed in with newspaper to keep the gunpowder from spilling out."

I remembered finding a piece of charred newspaper. But the most interesting part of the report proved to be about the book itself. The center had been hollowed out to make room for the mousetrap and gunpowder, but it was not a copy of *War and Peace*. It was Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*. "Josh couldn't have switched books on me," I insisted.

"Someone did, and you claim no one else approached the mailbox until Aaron DeVille removed the book. He sure didn't kill himself."

"Maybe he did." I was grasping at straws now. "He slipped the book into the pocket of his jacket and then took it out again and unwrapped it. Maybe he switched packages."

But Sheriff Lens shook his head. "He had three rifles hanging over the fireplace, and it's not as awkward as you might think to kill yourself with one. A lot easier than buildin' a bomb and hollowing out a book to put it in. Besides, what happened to *War and Peace?*"

I had to agree he was right. "Did the wrapping match the paper Josh uses?"

"Identical, though I suppose anyone could have gotten it by simply buying a book."

I shook my head. I still came back to Josh. And now I thought I might have his motive. I left the sheriff's office and walked down the street to Josh's Books.

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Sylvia Grant was working behind the counter. There was no sign of Josh. "He's gone over to the funeral parlor to pay his respects. It's a closed coffin, of course. Mr. DeVille is being buried tomorrow."

"Did you know him well?" I asked casually, thumbing through Van Doren's impressive biography of Benjamin Franklin.

"Hardly at all, just as a voice on the telephone."

"That's odd, because one of the neighbors told me you used to go out to his house occasionally."

Sylvia took off her glasses and stared at me. Maybe she could see me better without them. "I might have gone there once or twice to deliver books."

"No, I got the impression these visits were more personal. They were usually when Damon was away, but he knew about them."

Her pretty face froze into a noncommittal mask. "What are you trying to do to me, Dr. Sam?"

"Just get at the truth."

"My God, do you think I killed him?"

"No, but you might have supplied the motive. I'm sorry to ask you these personal questions, Sylvia, but they've become important. I need to know about your relations with Josh—and with Aaron DeVille."

She shook her head, laughing now. "My relations with Josh are strictly employee-employer. I've never even had a drink with the man. Frankly, I doubt if he cares too much about women."

"All right. What about DeVille?"

"He was almost twice my age but we liked each other. I won't deny it. I think it had pretty much run its course, though. He was looking for a wife and I didn't see him as a husband for me."

"Thank you for being honest with me," I said. "I was thinking Josh might be jealous about—"

The door opened and he walked in, cutting short our conversation. "I'm glad you stopped by, Doc. I have another book here that might interest you."

I winked at Sylvia and turned my attention to Josh. "Were you over at the funeral parlor?"

"Yes. A terrible thing, really. The more I think about it the more it seems he must have killed himself. How else could it have happened?"

"I've been talking to Sheriff Lens. The bomb was in a copy of *The Good Earth*. If he killed himself, Josh, what happened to *War and Peace?*"

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He thought about that. "Damned if I know."

Sylvia had moved away, tactfully, to arrange the window display.

"It's a mighty thick book to just disappear," I said, and even as I spoke the words I knew how it was done, and who had done it.

The funeral was scheduled for the following morning, and I needed to consult with Sheriff Lens about how to proceed. It was going to be difficult, either way. When I told him my suspicions, and went over it all bit by bit, he could only shake his head.

"You're bringing this to me, Doc?"

"I'm just asking, would it be better to make an arrest now, or wait till after the funeral in the morning?"

"After the funeral," he decided grimly. "I'll do it then."

There was a typical autumn chill in the air the following morning as the mourners gathered about the gravesite. Aaron DeVille was buried alongside his wife Rachel as the minister intoned words of final rest. I heard a few murmurs about the shortness of the wake, but most people seemed glad to have it over with. All of DeVille's neighbors were present, along with his brother and sister-in-law and Damon. Josh Vernon and Sylvia Grant had come too, apparently locking the bookstore for a few hours. Even Kenny Diggins was there, watching from the road where he'd parked his car before resuming his mail route.

Most everyone went back to the DeVille house afterwards. The neighbors had brought food, a country custom, and most people sat outside eating despite the chilly breeze. Sheriff Lens and I walked around the back of the house, where I spotted young Damon attacking some dead flowers with a stick.

"Come here, boy," I said kindly. "I want to talk to you." The sheriff stood off to one side as I put my arm around his shoulders. "I know it's a bum day when they bury your dad."

He muttered something, head down. I went on, gripping his shoulders just tightly enough so he couldn't break away. "It's an especially bad day when you know it was you who caused his death."

"Me? I didn't—" He tried to jerk away but I held him fast.

"Sylvia Grant told me you liked to baffle your dad with mysteries. This was just the sort of thing to appeal to you, making books disappear out of mailboxes. Then you decided to carry it one step further, causing a copy of *War and Peace* to turn into *The Good Earth,* all while the mailbox was being watched. It took me awhile to figure out how you did it, but I should have guessed it a lot sooner. I put

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a thick copy of *War and Peace* in that box, but a moment later your dad removed a book slim enough to slip into his jacket pocket, slim enough that even he must have realized it was a mistake. He unwrapped it on the spot, there in the yard, setting off the bomb you'd carefully planted."

"No!" the boy screamed. "I didn't mean to kill him. I didn't mean to! I didn't—"

"It took me the longest time to realize that you switched the books, Damon, in the same way that you caused the earlier ones to vanish. You did it simply by switching mailboxes."

He was breathing heavily, trying to break away, and Sheriff Lens moved in on his other side. "Just calm down, son. We'll let you make a statement after we talk to your aunt and uncle."

"I noticed yesterday that the boxes for your house and the Millars's place were tightly bolted down while the end ones were loose. That told me something when I thought about it later. It told me they'd been tampered with, loosened, removed—and transposed. Kenny delivered the mail around one. You got home at three-thirty and simply switched your mailbox with the Millars, putting them back in their correct positions after dark. Josh Vernon would drive up, look at the names, and deliver his books to the third box from the left, just as I did the day your father died. Naturally your dad, used to the position of the box, second from the left, opened it without bothering with the names. He came out that day without his reading glasses, so the names on the boxes were probably a blur to him anyway. The first three times the Millars box—the one he opened by mistake—was empty. The last time, the bomb was in it, made from material you found around your own basement—a mousetrap, gunpowder from your father's cartridge reloading. When you put the boxes back in position the other night—Marta Chesnut heard you go across to your house—you made the mistake of tightening the nuts and bolts too much. They were different from the others."

Sheriff Lens had one question. "Why didn't any of the neighbors see him making the switch in the afternoons, Doc?"

"He probably loosened the bolts earlier, so he only had to give them a quick turn and lift the boxes. His body would have shielded the action from across the street. They'd think he was just checking for mail, if they noticed it at all."

Damon was crying now, heavy gasping sobs that seemed to shake his entire body. "I didn't do it, I didn't kill him!"

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"You had the paper from Josh's store because you'd stolen the earlier books. Why'd you pick *The Good Earth?* Just because it was the right size to fit the wrapping for one of the earlier books?"

"That's enough, Doc," Sheriff Lens decided. He took the sobbing boy and led him away.

I was breathing hard myself, trying to calm my emotions. It was a terrible thing to accuse a twelve-year-old boy of killing his father. Had he done it because of the cruelty to his mother years earlier, or because he felt that Sylvia Grant was gradually taking his mother's place? I walked away from the DeVille house, through the tall weeds, because I hadn't really come to grips with the motive yet. If he resented the beating of his mother he would have acted much earlier than this, wouldn't he? Sylvia had said he liked to baffle his dad. That implied trickery. Any one of the tricks could have been deadly before this. And if he resented Sylvia he would have acted against her and not his father.

I went over the reasoning again in my own mind, remembering the position of the mailboxes clearly. I'd placed the book in the third box in line, the one with DeVille's name on it. Later the second box had carried his name. The boxes had been switched, and only Damon DeVille could have done it. He was trying to baffle his father with another mystery. Everything fit. The material for the bomb had come from the DeVille basement, where the killer must have had access to it. Therefore the killer had to live in the house. Certainly DeVille wouldn't have left Sylvia alone in the house long enough for her to fashion a bomb, even if she'd had a motive. No, it had to be a member of the household. There were only the two of them, Aaron and Damon. I'd shown it couldn't be suicide, so that only left Damon—

"Damon!"

How could I have been so wrong?

I ran through the grass and weeds, calling his name as I reached the house. It was Sheriff Lens who told me he was in the sheriff's car with his Uncle Zach. He'd admitted switching the mailboxes and the books, but denied any knowledge of the bomb.

I ran out to the car and yanked open the rear door where the boy sat with his uncle. "Damon, you'll have to forgive me. I had it all wrong. Because it had to be you who switched the boxes, I jumped to the conclusion you assembled the bomb. It wasn't you. It was never you."

"Then who was it?" Zach DeVille demanded.

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"Rachel DeVille killed her husband, even though she's been dead nearly two years."

Sheriff Lens was shaking his head sadly. "You almost made a terrible mistake, Doc. We all did."

I was staring out the window of his car as we drove back to town. "The motive didn't work out for Damon, but it did for his mother, who'd been beaten and abused by Aaron DeVille. I said the makings of the bomb were in the basement, but there were no detonators there. A detonator isn't the sort of thing a boy comes up with. And what about the other things? I saw a mousetrap in the DeVille basement that probably hadn't been touched in a couple of years. And there was a thick layer of dust on the containers of gunpowder. More than that, a charred bit of newspaper used as packing for the bomb had a headline about Roosevelt's renomination, dating it from late June of 1936—more than two years ago. Yet the old newspapers in the basement only went back a few months."

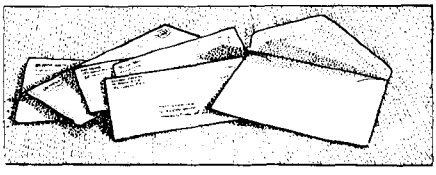
"She made the bomb back then?" Sheriff Lens asked. "Before she died in that accident? How'd she even know how to assemble it?"

"Probably from one of her husband's books. I saw one there on guns and explosives. She probably did it in a moment of controlled rage, then put *The Good Earth* back on the shelf and waited. The ten-year-old Damon was forbidden to touch the books, so she knew only her husband would be likely to open it. If he didn't, I'm sure she had another scheme. She might phone him and say, 'I'm leaving you. There's a letter in *The Good Earth* explaining everything.' As fate would have it, she died before she could complete her plan."

"How do you know Damon didn't find the bomb in the book and follow through with his mother's plan?"

"Because if he'd opened that book he'd be dead now instead of Aaron."

As we drove back to town I remembered that photograph of the happy family at the DeVille house. I remembered Rachel's smiling face—a woman already punished for a crime she'd only now committed.



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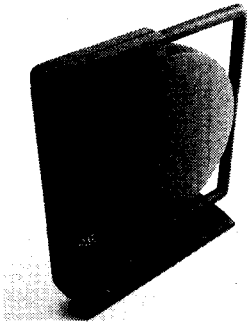

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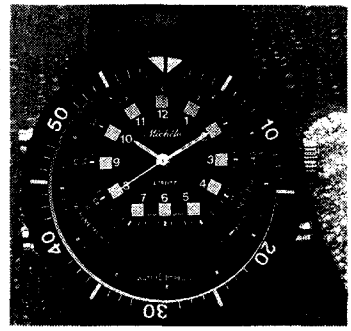

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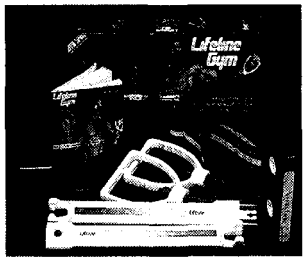

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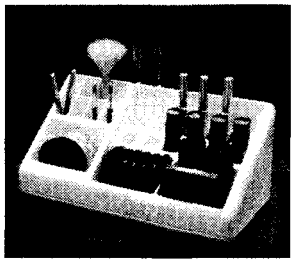

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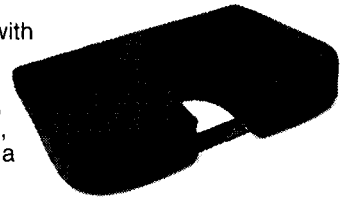

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A parliamentary reporter for the BBC, British writer Gillian Linscott is best known in this country for the series of Edwardian mystery novels she writes featuring suffragette and amateur sleuth Nell Bray. The most recent book in that series (Ms. Linscott's seventh novel) will be published by St. Martin's Press in early 1995. Though set in the present, the author's new story for EQMM *recalls events of the early 1960s . . .*

DEATH OF A DEAD MAN

by GILLIAN LINSCOTT

"It might help you to know, Inspector, that Andreas Tithe died at exactly five minutes past eleven on the morning of June first, nineteen sixty-six."

The Master of Saint Dubricius' College let the words float towards the bookcases opposite, over the head of the plainclothes inspector in the leather armchair. His voice was weary, his hair thin and silver in the October sunshine. The inspector, in his late forties, had the air of a man long past being surprised, but he raised his eyebrows, looked at his digital watch. "Andreas Tithe was stabbed to death at some time between seven-oh-three and seven forty-two yesterday evening, October twenty-four, nineteen ninety-four. It's notoriously difficult to establish an exact time of death, but that apparently gives us a discrepancy of some twenty-nine years and five months."

Silence, apart from the Master's sigh. Inspector Caswold flexed a leg, adjusted a trouser crease, stared critically at his sleek black sock. It took him some moments to realise that the Master's sigh contained a word—a word he'd used himself a few seconds earlier. Now it came wafting back like a shuttlecock returned, but so slowly that it seemed to hover in the air above him. "Apparently."

"Apparently," said Andreas Tithe, "I've kept you waiting." Immediate laughter from his audience. Six minutes past eleven on the first

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morning in June with plenty of distractions outside, and yet this echoing room in Oxford Examination Schools was so crowded that there were still people looking for seats. Only two other lecturers achieved full houses and both of those were a generation older than Andreas Tithe. From a distance he looked much the same age as the students, who were trying to lounge on hard seats, men in denims, girls in skirts that were no more than friezes for pale thighs, academic gowns twisted into near invisibility. Tithe had a way of wearing his own long gown that seemed to transform it into ironic fancy dress. Today he was wearing it over black corduroy trousers, black shirt, black knitted tie. His brown hair curled down past his collar. He brushed a quiff of it back from his forehead as he paused for the laugh he'd known would come on the word "apparently." A private joke between him and several hundred philosophy students. They'd been exploring it all term. What did it mean if you said that something was apparently the case? Did that imply the possibility that it might not be what it appeared to be? If so, could you make any statement about the appearance of something that did not carry with it its own negation?

"I say apparently I've kept you waiting. We shall, for once, slide over the enticingly thin ice of 'apparently' to 'I've,' or rather to 'I.' I have kept you waiting. But how can you decide if this assemblage of sense impressions apparently standing in front of you and calling itself 'I' is connected with the apparently similar assemblage that went under the same label for my previous lectures?"

Some students began taking notes, but the trio in the front row, just under the lecturer's podium, had no notebooks. The central figure was a girl with a pale, intense face and long dark hair, wearing a brief blue shift under her scholar's gown. She stared at Tithe as if unconscious of the men on either side of her. The one on her right was good-looking and had a self-assured air. He wore white cotton trousers and a cowboy belt of embossed leather. He kept glancing at the girl, but she wouldn't look at him. The man on her left seemed deathly tired, leaning back in his seat, legs stretched out, dark circles around his closed eyes. He was almost skeletally thin, with bare ankles and long dusty feet in leather sandals sticking out from faded jeans. Farther back, near the door, a man of about Tithe's own age watched with a look of contempt on his face.

When Tithe noticed the man he smiled. He took a step forward, placed his left hand on his chest.

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"A label to which we must now add RIP." He crossed his right hand over his left and closed his eyes, a tombstone effigy made vertical. "Andreas Tithe died one minute ago, as he was about to walk in to give this lecture."

Some uneasy laughter. The thin student, without opening his eyes, mouthed one word: "Clown." The man on the girl's right glanced across at him warningly, but she took no notice.

"Fortunately, I happened to be here to take his place. I am Andreas Tithe's identical twin brother, also, through lack of inspiration on the part of our parents, named Andreas. I share my ideas with Andreas. I have a mole on my left buttock in exactly the same place as Andreas . . ."

Laughter, more assured now they knew where this was heading. The thin student opened his eyes and looked sideways at the girl.

" . . . and yet I stand here and assure you that I am not Andreas Tithe, although I am in every respect identical with Andreas Tithe. Now the first question this might raise . . ."

The man who'd been watching from the back slid out so quietly that only the lecturer noticed.

"It was, of course, an extremely facile point he was making."

Even twenty-nine years later the contempt was still there in the Master's voice.

"Do I take it that it was some kind of joke?"

"I assume you have no interest in philosophy, Inspector."

"I could never quite grasp what it was. Was there a twin brother?"

"Of course there wasn't. Nor did Andreas Tithe drop dead on his way into the lecture hall. It was the same man."

"The same man who had a kitchen knife stuck into his heart yesterday evening?"

"Yes."

"So you think when he made his call to the station at seven-oh-three yesterday it had something to do with what he said at a lecture all that time ago?"

There was a cassette tape recorder on the table by the inspector's chair. He pressed a button.

"Good evening. This is Andreas Tithe, fellow of St. Dubricius' College. I wish to report that I'm dead. That's all."

There was the sound of a receiver being put down, quite gently, over the policewoman's voice asking him please to repeat the message.

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"As you hear, he'd rung off."

"Yes, that would be quite normal."

"Normal to ring up the police station and report yourself dead?"

Coffee arrived. The Master poured.

"I'm surprised your colleagues didn't tell you. Have you been working in Oxford long?"

"Three weeks. I'm a long way from my usual patch. Half the officers from your force have been sent off to investigate allegations of corruption in three other forces, so they've had to fill in from wherever's not being investigated at the moment."

The Master blinked, drank.

"That explains why you didn't know about poor Tithe. These outbreaks of his happened only every few months or so."

"He made a habit of this?"

"In recent years, yes. The summer we've been talking about, nineteen sixty-six, represented the high point of Tithe's career. He'd already made something of a name for himself among the students and in the popular press protesting about the war in Vietnam. The students were always organizing demonstrations and occupations, and Tithe appointed himself their apologist. So some of the less responsible tabloids decided to join in the joke about his death—if you could consider it a joke. He achieved what you might call his apotheosis on a television programme discussing the nature of reality with the manageress of a striptease club and a geriatric Trotskyist guerrilla from one of the Latin American countries. It was broadcast very late at night."

"So in his dotage he was harking back to his past successes."

"I'd hardly use the word dotage, Inspector. Tithe and I were almost exactly the same age."

"I'm sorry. But apart from that . . . "

"Yes. Tithe had taken to ringing up the police, writing to the obituary editors, and so on to announce his own death. The call you've just played to me was probably one of a dozen or so he made over the past few years."

"Yes, but last night there was a difference, wasn't there? Within thirty-nine minutes of making that call Andreas Tithe was dead. Really dead."

The Master winced. He said, almost humbly, "I wonder if you'd mind telling me exactly what happened. There was so much to think about last night that I . . . well, I'm not sure that I took it all in."

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He grimaced, either from the taste of the homely phrase in his mouth or the hot coffee.

"You've heard our duty officer taking the phone call. She immediately reported it to me. Not knowing what you've just told me, I took it seriously and drove straight to St. Dubricius'. I established from your porter that there was a fellow of the college by the name of Andreas Tithe and asked for directions to his room. The door was unlocked."

"And you found him?"

"Yes. It looks as if he was stabbed in the armchair where he was sitting. The knife was driven in with considerable force. It's quite difficult, you know, to push a knife into somebody's heart. Physically difficult."

The Master closed his eyes.

"Yes. I recall reading somewhere that they almost invariably get it wrong . . . in productions of *Tosca.*" It was a brave effort, but came out as a series of gasps.

"The murderer probably had the chair back to push against. He or she could have put a knee in Mr. Tithe's lap and driven the knife home. A preliminary report from the pathologist suggests that's how it might have been done. No fingerprints on the knife, unfortunately."

"Gloves?"

"Almost certainly. I checked my watch when I knew he was dead. It was seven forty-two. What happened after that, you know."

A night of disbelief giving way to numb shock, of shaken undergraduates and dons made uneasy by being powerless.

"As far as we've been able to establish, he was last seen alive at about two o'clock yesterday afternoon. Nobody in the college admits to visiting him after seven-oh-three when he made the phone call to us. The porter is convinced that nobody who was not a member of college came in between seven-oh-three and my arrival."

"I hope you're not implying that the murderer must have been a member of this college. This is not a high-security establishment. Anybody might have come in earlier, stayed in . . . "

"We've checked your own alibi. The bursar confirms that you were with him from just before seven o'clock until the porter came and found you at about ten to eight."

The Master didn't respond to that. He sat there with the inspector's eyes on him and it was some time before he said anything.

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"One might call it an odd coincidence. If you had not taken that telephone call seriously, the murder might not have been discovered until this morning."

"Do you attach any particular significance to that?"

A defeated shake of the head. The inspector stood up.

"The bursar's kindly allowing us to use his room to go on questioning the staff and students. It will take most of the day, I'm afraid."

On his way to the door he said as an afterthought, "So this death business attracted a lot of attention at the time."

"I'm afraid so. Some of the students even held a mock funeral."

The plywood coffin, black-painted in hasty streaks, lurched down the ramp at the punt station beside Folly Bridge on the shoulders of four men in evening dress and academic gowns. A less formal procession followed them, about thirty students in jeans and sweaters with bottles, torches, and carrier bags. A few tourists watched from the bridge, silhouetted against the last light of a June evening.

On the ramp, in the shadow of the bridge, it was dusk already. The bearers paused on the landing stage and somebody came forward with a makeshift wreath of ivy and syringa, plundered from the gardens of north Oxford lodgings. As the coffin was loaded into a punt the lid slipped off, revealing emptiness, and had to be lodged on again. Once it was safely aboard, one of the bearers took a punt pole and the others formed an impromptu guard of honour, paddles raised in salute. Somebody began humming a dead march and as the party took it up it spread over the darkening water.

"Who's travelling with the coffin? Chief mourner. Come on, Cherry."

The dark-haired girl was urged to the front of the group and took her place neatly in the punt, wedged on the seat alongside the coffin. Without invitation, the two men who'd been sitting next to her in the lecture hall followed. The thin man folded himself on the seat facing her, the other stepped over him to get to the bow. The painter was untied and the punt pushed off into the current. The dead march trailed away raggedly as the rest of the party scrambled for places in other punts. By the time they turned out of the Isis and into the smaller, tree-darkened River Cherwell there were five punts on the water, the one carrying the coffin well in front. The man in evening dress punted impassively, as if he really were a funeral mute, while

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the three round the coffin talked in low tones. The thin man, Hal, was the angry one.

"I wish we were burying the bastard. I wish we really were burying the bastard." He slapped his hand on the coffin.

Cherry, looking ahead into the gathering darkness, said, "You really can't blame Andreas." She was drawing slowly on an untidy cigarette. She offered it to Hal but he waved it aside and the man in the bow reached over to take it. He took a long drag before echoing what she'd said.

"You can't blame him. You'd do the same in his place. Besides, he didn't put them there."

"Who did then? Do you think I'd keep two thousand tabs of LSD under my bed. In a shoe box, for Christ's sake."

"Does that make it worse?"

"Somebody must have put them there."

The other man laughed. "Not necessarily. Andreas would tell you that the presence of an object in a place implies nothing about its past—or anything else."

Hal grunted. "He could try telling that to the police tomorrow."

"You can't expect him to go to the police."

Cherry reclaimed the cigarette from the other man and offered it again to Hal. He took one long, angry drag then threw the butt in a high arc into the river. "Why not? At the very least he could go to the police and proctors and tell them I was a model student, wouldn't have anything to do with drugs."

"They wouldn't believe him. It would only damage his career for nothing."

"His bloody career. What about my career?"

The other man said, "But you hate it here, you're always saying so. Last term you were supposed to be going to Hanoi to fight for the Viet Cong."

"Perhaps I shall. It's a big world out there."

"Well then."

"So why don't you come with me, all three of us? And Andreas bloody Tithe as well if he likes. Do something besides talk, talk, talk for a change."

Silence.

"You won't, will you? Too wrapped up in your cosy little worlds. Andreas will get his professorship, you two will get your bloody firsts. Cherry will go on screwing Andreas when he's got the time and you when he's too busy. Roses and CND signs round the door

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and bourgeois complacency flowering all pink and white in the front garden."

He picked up the wreath from the coffin and sent it skittering over the dark river, white flowers breaking away from it like sparks from a Catherine wheel. The punt went on under Magdalen Bridge, nosed its way to the point where the channel divided. The other punts were some way behind, more heavily loaded, but they could hear the occasional shout or laugh coming from them. Hal said, "I've had enough of this."

"It's a long way to walk back. You might as well stay for the wake."

Hal muttered something but later, as the punt came alongside the island, he was still with them, feet resting on the coffin, staring at Cherry like somebody making an accusation.

Cherry Delmer, philosophy tutor from another college, was standing at the window of the Master's study looking out. The sun shone on her glossy dark hair, expensively cut with only a few strands of grey in it. She wore a dark-green trouser-suit and soft leather boots.

The Master said, "There was something I didn't tell the police inspector. Not that it was relevant."

"What was that?"

"That at one time I hated Andreas Tithe quite enough to want to stop his heart with a kitchen knife."

"That was a long time ago."

"Twenty-nine years ago. The feeling was usually at its worst just after you'd come to me for a tutorial."

He waited to hear if she'd say anything. She went on staring out of the window.

"You'd read me your essay, regurgitating his half-baked arguments. And you'd cross your legs and look at me, making sure I knew you'd just got out of his bed to come to my tutorial."

She turned, smiling.

"I don't think I was doing that. Not consciously."

"At one time I'd have asked you what you meant by 'consciously.' "

"At one time I shouldn't have used the word without writing an essay about it. I didn't know you knew."

"That would be another essay. Oh yes, I knew. I seriously considered telling the principal of your college that you were having an affair with a senior member of the university, a man twenty years older than you."

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"Of course, if you had, everybody would have assumed you'd done it because you were envious of him—academically, I mean."

"They'd have been right."

"Not that you needed to be."

"No. I got the professorship and ended up as Master of the college of which poor Tithe had become such an undistinguished fellow."

"The whirligig of time."

She turned back to the window. They were near equals now, had attended too many university occasions, sat on too many committees together to have kept a tutor and pupil relationship. The gap between forty-nine and seventy was narrower than the gulf between twenty and forty-one.

"It was good of you to take so much trouble to let me know."

A touch of irony in her voice. As he'd passed on to her in detail all the inspector had told him, the knee in the lap, the thrust against the back of the armchair, it had come to her that he was taking a kind of revenge, a revenge by proxy for something almost half a lifetime away.

"I should have telephoned you earlier, only I was talking to the inspector."

"Has the inspector any hypotheses?"

"Not that I could discover. The police are questioning all of us, senior members, students, staff."

"Is that the inspector out there with your porter?"

Two men were standing on the opposite side of the quad, looking up at something.

"Yes. That will be poor Tithe's window they're looking at. I suppose somebody might have climbed in but . . ."

"I must go. You'll have so much to do."

"Something I meant to ask you. Did you ever know of any relations?"

She stared at him, not understanding, then, "Oh, you mean Andreas Tithe's relations? No, we never discussed them."

"No, I don't suppose you did. There's the question, you see, of the funeral. . . ."

The soil of the island was soft but heavy. They dug, taking it in turns with the two spades they'd brought with them, by the light of a bonfire that illuminated the scrub of elder and pussy willow like the green walls of a marquee. Inside that space, with darkness all around them and the sound of the river just a few dozen yards

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away on either side, they laughed and talked and drank. Somebody had brought a guitar, somebody else a mouth organ. They sang the songs they usually kept for the coach journeys to Grosvenor Square for demos. "No More Napalm" and "I'm the Man that Waters the Workers' Beer." Cherry sang with the rest. Hal wandered off sulkily by himself with a bottle of beer and a cigarette and sat on the very tip of the island under a big willow, as if on the prow of a boat thrusting against the current into the darkness upriver. The smell of bonfire, of baking sausages, of pot, warmed the air, with the tang of wet river earth under it as the hole grew deeper. People kept tripping over the empty coffin. Some couples had already taken themselves off into the bushes and the occasional giggle or whisper drifted back in lulls between the singing.

"It must be deep enough by now."

The bearers picked up the coffin.

"Listen."

There was a sound of splashing from upstream, then a call from Hal, surly and alarmed.

"Who's there?"

They ran to join Hal by the willow tree, carrying sticks from the bonfire for light. A figure was bending over beside Hal, tying a painter to a bush. When it straightened up and more light fell on it they saw it was Andreas Tithe, holding a dripping kayak paddle.

"I could hardly miss my own funeral, could I?"

The laughter was a little uneasy. He was, for all his popularity with them, a senior member of the university, out of place at a party that was breaking several dozen sets of regulations. But they took him to the bonfire, pressed a paper cup of red wine into his hand. When the other hand found its way round Cherry's waist there was a general relaxation. For the night, at least, he was sharing their outlawry.

"Want to pronounce your own funeral oration, Andreas?"

"I thought I'd done that already. It's somebody else's turn."

One of the coffin bearers took over, his evening trousers blotched with damp earth.

"Dearly beloved brethren and sisters, we are apparently gathered here, assuming that the concept of place has any validity . . ."

Cries of "Get on with it!"

" . . . we therefore commit his notional body to the earth, in the unsure and entirely unsustainable hypothesis that he once existed,

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now exists—assuming he ever did—no longer, and will rise again on the third day . . . "

A shout from the back. "Why wait?"

The bearers took it literally, picked up the light coffin and knelt to ease it down into the hole, which was more than deep enough. They rained a few spadefuls of earth on it, enough to cover the lid but no more, then went back to the party. The singing grew wilder, hiding entirely the rustlings of the couples in the bushes. Then the bonfire began to die down and the darkness changed to the clear white sky of pre-dawn. The wine ran out, the singing ended, and the party sorted itself dazedly into punt-loads and drifted back down the river with the current. The partly filled grave was a dark pit in the half-light.

"I'm certain that it was never properly filled in that night."

Cherry Delmer was quite at ease in the superintendent's office. When the superintendent had introduced her to Inspector Caswold he'd mentioned that she was deputy chairperson of the liaison committee between police and university authorities, a clear warning to the new officer on the block to mind his manners. He added that Miss Delmer had known the deceased, Andreas Tithe, for some thirty years and had come to him with information that might have some bearing on the murder.

Inspector Caswold had made no comment. He'd looked at her in an appraising way when they shook hands, but with no obvious hostility. While she'd talked about the undergraduate party twenty-nine summers ago, he'd glanced sometimes at her face, sometimes at her slim legs in their sheer grey-tinted tights. Now he asked his first question.

"Even if it wasn't filled in, why do you think that was connected with Mr. Tithe's murder last night?"

She met his eyes, calm and confident.

"Because I think there's a body in the grave."

He glanced at the superintendent but got no help, beyond a stony expression that told him Miss Delmer must not be mocked.

"Why do you think that?"

"I went back to the island about five months after the party. I hadn't intended to, but there was a particularly fine day that October and a woman friend and myself took a punt out. I'd been telling her about the party, so we tied up and landed there. We found the grave easily enough, but it was filled up, right to the top. There

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were even weeds and grass growing on it as if it had been filled in months before, soon after the party."

"Perhaps somebody who was at the party went back and filled it in properly."

"But why? It was only an empty plywood box. And mostly nobody set foot on the island from one summer term to the next."

He said, with a sharpness he hadn't shown in talking to the Master, "Isn't that what you'd call a logical hiatus? A mock grave is filled in, so you assume there must be a real body in it?"

She didn't seem offended. "As you say, a logical hiatus. A belief, though capable of being empirically tested."

The superintendent translated, "Miss Delmer thinks we should dig it up."

"Yes sir, but I ask again what bearing it could have on Mr. Tithe's death."

"Are you making much progress in other directions?"

"Certain lines of inquiry are being followed."

The superintendent knew what that meant.

"In that case, you might as well try it, mightn't you? At least we don't have to get Home Office permission to dig up an empty box."

He seemed to think that should be an end to the matter, but Caswold said, "May we ask why Miss Delmer didn't think of reporting her suspicions to the police at the time?"

She gave him a straight look. "You may remember that relations between students and police were not particularly cordial in nineteen sixty-six, Inspector."

Caswold shrugged, his only sign of impatience so far. He seemed to prefer to put his questions to her through the superintendent.

"Twenty-nine years ago Miss Delmer thought there might be somebody in the grave. Did she have any more theories? Who it was, for instance?"

Accepting his methods with good grace, she directed her reply at the superintendent.

"There was a man named Hal Brown, a second-year student like most of the rest of us. We never saw him again after the party. Nobody remembered leaving the island with him."

"Surely inquiries were made."

"Yes. The day before the party the police had searched his lodgings and found a large quantity of LSD tablets under his bed. He denied putting them there or knowing anything about them, but he'd been charged with possession and let out on bail."

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"Had he put them there?"

"I don't know. A lot of students had digs in the same house, including me as it happens. People were in and out of each other's rooms all the time."

"So you all assumed he'd run off?"

He put the question directly to her this time.

"Yes, we thought he'd gone abroad. He'd talked about going to North Vietnam. A lot of people did at the time."

"Went to Vietnam?"

"No, talked about it."

The superintendent began shuffling papers.

"All this should be in the records for nineteen sixty-six, Inspector. You can get somebody to look it up for you while you take Miss Delmer to her island."

Caswold made no comment as he held open the door for her.

There were a few tourists watching as they loaded themselves into a punt at Folly Bridge. Cherry Delmer had changed back into her trouser-suit and boots. They were accompanied by two constables in overalls with spades and gardening gauntlets. A battery-powered strimmer and some secateurs had been added at the last minute when she reminded them that the island would be overgrown. Apart from that there hadn't been much conversation since the meeting in the superintendent's office. With one of the constables poling inexpertly they traced a zigzag course along the Isis and grounded under a tree almost as soon as they'd turned into the Cherwell. After watching his struggles for a few minutes, Cherry Delmer said, "I could take over it if you like. I'm quite good at punting."

"No."

They untangled themselves from the tree and pushed on against the current.

"I suppose your career hasn't brought you into much contact with punts, Inspector."

"No."

The constable was sweating and red-faced before she pointed to a tangle of trees ahead. "That's the island."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure. If we go to the left we can tie up where we used to tie up for the parties."

When they stepped onto the wet soil, between twisted roots, they were facing a head-high screen of nettles and pussy willows. She

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went first, her slim body breaking a path for them. After fifty yards or so the nettles cleared, giving way to browning stalks of willow herb with seed fluff clinging to them.

"It was about here."

This time he didn't ask if she were sure, but she explained. "I'm going by the big willow tree on the end. Hal was sulking there for most of the party."

"Was that where you said Andreas Tithe landed in his kayak?"

"Yes, he'd come down from Bardwell Road, the opposite direction to the way we went."

"Did he leave with the rest of you?"

"I don't know. I suppose he'd have been going back in the opposite direction as well."

"So you didn't see him leave and you didn't see Hal Brown leave?"

"No."

She dug the toe of her boot into layers of dead leaves. He saw she was scuffing leaf mould away from a charred branch.

"Bonfire."

"Not from twenty-nine years ago."

"People tend to make them in the same place. Hadn't you noticed?"

She turned back towards the big willow tree.

"The grave was towards the willow but not far from the bonfire, because we were digging by the light of it."

She took a couple of paces, moved sideways, stopped.

"Somewhere here. Not more than ten yards from here, left or right."

The constables moved in with strimmer and spade. While the machine buzzed and tattered weeds fell in swathes, she watched as if she were paying somebody to do the gardening. The digging began in earnest, first leaf mould, then yellowish brown soil.

At two feet or so she said, "It wouldn't have been any deeper than that. Try to the right."

The constables looked to Caswold for instructions, expressions asking how long this game was supposed to continue.

"If Miss Delmer says so."

She didn't react to the sarcasm in his voice. Eighteen inches or so down, with the men tiring and every jab of their spades a comment, she darted forward and picked up something from the last spadeful of earth thrown clear.

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"Plywood." A piece no wider than a hand, slimy grey on one side, fresh yellow on the other where layers had been gashed apart by the spade. The inspector took it from her.

"Right, carefully from now on, just in case."

They dug shallow spadefuls, gradually exposing a sheet of plywood, almost horizontal but tilted a little.

"See if you can get your spades under it."

"It wouldn't have been nailed," she said.

The spades prised it away from the earth, threw it back onto strimmed willow herb.

"Christ!"

Just one word from a constable. The inspector stepped forward. Cherry Delmer stayed where she was.

"Bell, I suppose you left your radio in the punt. Get on to it and call the scene-of-crime team. Tell them to come down by motor boat from Bardwell Road if they can. Tedder, you'd better go with him. See if you can find a tarpaulin or something in the punt and bring it here."

With the constables gone, the two of them stood looking down. The sides of the makeshift coffin had collapsed outwards, letting in earth, but the bones were there. The jaw had fallen away from the skull. The bones of one hand had settled in formation, as orderly as the stones of a necklace.

"They'll be able to identify him from dental records," she said.

The inspector dropped the piece of plywood she'd given him carefully onto a pile of fresh soil.

"Your people will be checking the records by now. Students missing in the summer of nineteen sixty-six. They'll have found that there were two of them at the same time, Hal and another man. Both friends of mine."

He said nothing.

"I don't suppose the police looked for them long. Students were always going off—Kabul or California or Katmandu. They might have been anywhere in the world."

"I suppose so."

"They might even enroll at an American university, get a degree after all, come back in ten years or so as respectable citizens."

"As respectable as a tutor of philosophy, for instance?"

His voice was different. She looked at him.

"Yes. As respectable as that, or even more so. Only Hal didn't, did he?"

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"If it is Hal."

"Oh yes, it's Hal. I'm quite sure of that."

He didn't respond. From beyond the bushes and nettles they heard the raised voice of the constable speaking into a radio, but couldn't make out the words.

She said, "Hal would have been sent down in any case. He wasn't a particularly good student and a court would never have believed he didn't know about the LSD tabs, even if he told the police about the others."

"Others?"

"My other friend, the other missing man. And Andreas Tithe. Andreas and the other man were distributing LSD. I know that."

"You're telling me that you have certain knowledge that Andreas Tithe dealt in drugs?"

"We wouldn't have used a heavy word like deal. It was more a case of doing it for your friends. But that's the way the police would have seen it, yes."

"Did he go on doing it?"

She laughed. "You mean, did he go on pushing drugs into his seventies? Of course not. When the police charged Hal, that scared him off for good. He was scared off quite a lot of things that summer."

He glanced sideways at her.

They heard somebody pushing heavily through the undergrowth, something being dropped and retrieved. The second constable was on his way back.

"That October when you found the grave filled in, you knew what had happened?"

"I didn't know which of them it was. But I suppose I guessed it was more likely to be Hal."

"But you didn't say anything until today."

"Two things happened in the last twenty-four hours. One was that Andreas Tithe was murdered."

"And the other?"

"The other was a direct consequence. The Master of Dubricius used to be my tutor. He knew Andreas and I had been lovers a long time ago. He called me round to break the news. I'm still not sure whether it was kindness or revenge."

"After all these years?"

"After all these years. While I was in his study he pointed out the inspector hard at work investigating Tithe's murder. I had a

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closer look at you on my way out. You were busy with the porter so you didn't see me."

"No."

"I was certain then, as I hadn't been certain twenty-nine years ago, that it was Hal in the grave."

He said nothing. The nettles were swaying wildly.

"Two friends of mine disappeared on the night of the party. One of them's down there."

Silence.

"And you came back in the end, with your degree from America or wherever. I wonder why you decided to join the police? At one time we'd have thought it was worse than going into a leper colony. Was that why?"

He said, almost under his breath, "What are you going to do?"

"Do? I'm a philosopher, remember."

The top of a hurrying head was in sight above the nettles.

He said, softly and quickly, "Andreas must have killed him, very early that morning after the rest of us went. Killed him to stop him talking about the LSD."

"And now somebody's killed Andreas. It must have been a shock when the duty officer told you about that phone call. You probably saw it as a threat to you, though it wasn't."

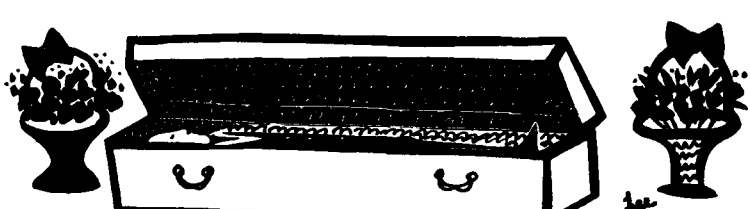
He insisted, voice scarcely under control, "It must have been Andreas. He kept him talking here on the island, they argued, then he killed him. Don't you see, it was Andreas?"

The constable arrived, arms loaded with bright blue punt cushions.

"No tarpaulin or anything, sir. We thought these might do to cover it over with."

Caswold looked at her, his face begging for a response.

"Apparently," she said.



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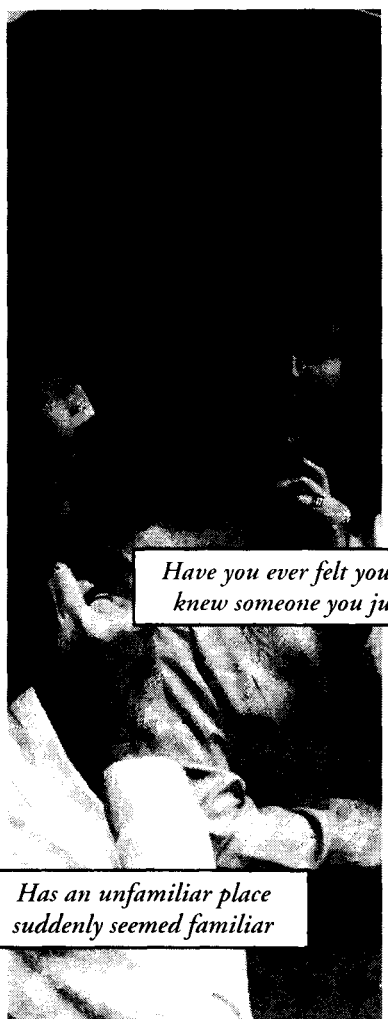

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JAMES POWELL

For writers of a fanciful turn of mind such as James Powell, the legends and lore of Christmas teem with possibilities for mystery fiction. We're offering three Christmas stories by Mr. Powell this year: you've seen one already in the December issue, and there's another still to come in January. This time the author speculates about the origin of the jolliest of old men . . .

GRIST FOR THE MILLS OF CHRISTMAS

by JAMES POWELL

The tabloid press dubbed the corner of southern Ontario bounded by Windsor, Sarnia, and St. Thomas "The Christmas Triangle" after holiday travelers began vanishing there in substantial numbers. When the disappearances reached twenty-seven, Wayne Sorley, editor-at-large of *The Traveling Gourmet* magazine, ever on the alert for offbeat articles, penciled in a story on "Bed-and-Breakfasting Through the Triangle of Death" for an upcoming Christmas number, intending to combine seasonal decorations and homey breakfast recipes (including a side article on "Muffins from Hell") with whatever details of the mysterious triangle came his way.

So when the middle of December rolled around, Sorley flew to Detroit, rented a car, and drove across the border into snow, wind, and falling temperatures.

He quickly discovered the bed-and-breakfast people weren't really crazy about the Christmas Triangle slant. Some thought it was bad for business. Few took the disappearances as lightly as Sorley did.

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To make matters worse, his reputation had preceded him. The current issue of *The Traveling Gourmet* contained his "Haunted Inns of the Coast of Maine" and his side article "Cod Cakes from Hell," marking him as a dangerous guest to have around. Some places on Sorley's itinerary received him grudgingly. Others claimed no record of his reservations and threatened to loose the dog on him if he didn't go away.

On the evening of the twenty-third of December, and well behind schedule, Sorley arrived at the last bed-and-breakfast on his prearranged itinerary to find a handwritten notice on the door. "Closed by the Board of Health." Shaking his fist at the dark windows, Sorley decided then and there to throw in the towel. To hell with the damn Christmas Triangle! So he found a motel for the night, resolving to get back across the border and catch the first available flight for New York City. But he awoke late to find a fresh fall of snow and a dead car battery.

It was midafternoon before Sorley, determined as ever, was on the road again. By six o'clock the snow was coming down heavily and aslant and he was still far from his destination. He drove on wearily. What he really needed now, he told himself, was a couple of weeks in Hawaii. How about an article on "The Twelve Luaus of Christmas"? This late they'd have to fake it. But what the hell, in Hawaii they have to fake the holidays anyway.

Finally Sorley couldn't take the driving anymore and turned off the highway to find a place for the night. That's when he saw the "Double Kay B & B" sign with the shingle hanging under it that said "Vacancy." On the front lawn beside the sign stood a fine old pickle-dish sleigh decorated with Christmas tree lights. Plastic reindeer lit electrically from within stood in the traces. Sorley pulled into the driveway and a moment later was up on the porch ringing the bell.

Mrs. Kay was a short, stoutish, white-haired woman with a pleasant face which, except for an old scar from a sharp-edged instrument across the left cheekbone, seemed untouched by care. She ushered Sorley inside and down a carpeted hallway and up the stairs. The house was small, tidy, bright, and comfortably arranged. Sorley couldn't quite find the word to describe it until Mrs. Kay showed him the available bedroom. The framed naval charts on the walls, the boat in a bottle, and the scrimshawed narwhal tusk on the mantel gave him the word he was looking for. The house was shipshape.

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Sorley took the room. But when he asked Mrs. Kay to recommend a place to eat nearby she insisted he share their dinner. "After all, it's Christmas Eve," she said. "You just freshen up, then, and come downstairs." Sorley smiled his thanks. The kitchen smells when she led him through the house had been delicious.

Sorley went back out to his car for his suitcase. The wind had ratcheted up its howl by several notches and was chasing streamers of snow down the road and across the drifts. But that was all right. He wasn't going anywhere. As he started back up the walk someone inside the house switched off the light on the bed-and-breakfast sign.

Sorley came out of his room pleased with his luck. Here he was settled in for the night with a roof over his head and a hot meal and a warm bed in the bargain. Suddenly Sorley felt eyes watching him, a sensation as strong as a torch on the nape of his neck. But when he looked back over his shoulder the hall was empty. Or had something tiny just disappeared behind the lowboy against the wall? Frowning, he turned his head around. As he did he caught the glimpse of a scurry, not the thing itself, but the turbulence of air left in the wake of some small creature vanishing down the stairs ahead of him. A mouse, perhaps. Or, if they were seagoing people, maybe the Kays kept rats. Sorley made a face. Then, shaking his head at his overheated imagination, he went downstairs.

Mrs. Kay fed him at a dining room table of polished wood with a single place setting. "I've already eaten," she explained. "I like my supper early. And Father, Mr. Kay, never takes anything before he goes to work. He'll just heat his up in the microwave when he gets home." The meal was baked finnan haddie. Creamed smoked haddock was a favorite Sorley had not seen for a long time. She served it with a half bottle of Alsatian Gewurtztraminer. There was Stilton cheese and a fresh pear for dessert. "Father hopes you'll join him later in the study for an after-dinner drink," said Mrs. Kay.

The study was a book-lined room decorated once again with relics and artifacts of the sea. The light came from a small lamp on the desk by the door and the fire burning in the grate. A painting of a brigantine under sail in a gray sea hung above the mantel. Mr. Kay, a tall, thin man with a long, sallow, clean-shaven face, heavy white eyebrows, and patches of white hair around his ears, rose from one of two wing-backed chairs facing the fire. As he shook his

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guest's hand he examined him and seemed pleased with what he saw. "Welcome, Mr. Sorley." Here was a voice that might once have boomed in the teeth of a gale. "Come sit by the fire."

Before sitting, Sorley paused to admire a grouping of three small statues on the mantel. They were realistic representations of pirates, each with a tarred pigtail and a brace of pistols, all three as ugly as sin and none more than six inches tall. A peglegged pirate. Another with a hook for a hand. The third wore a black eye patch. Seeing his interest, Mr. Kay took peg leg down and displayed it in his palm. "Nicely done, are they not? I'm something of a collector in the buccaneer line. Most people's family trees are hung about with horse thieves. Pirates swing from mine." He set the statue back on the mantel. "And I'm not ashamed of it. With all this what-do-you-call-it going round, this historical revisionism, who knows what's next? Take Christopher Columbus, eh? He started out a saint. Today he's worse than a pirate. Some call him a devil. And Geronimo has gone from devil incarnate to the noble leader of his people. But here, Mr. Sorley. Forgive my running on. Sit down and join me in a hot grog."

Sorley's host poured several fingers of a thick dark rum from a heavy green bottle by his foot, added water from the electric teakettle steaming on the hearth, urging as he passed him the glass, "Wrap yourself around that."

The drink was strong. It warmed Sorley's body like the sun on a cold spring day. "Thank you," he said. "And thanks for the excellent meal."

"Oh, we keep a good table, Mother and I. We live well. Not from the bed-and-breakfast business, I can tell you that. After all, we only open one night a year and accept only a single guest."

When Sorley expressed his surprise, Mr. Kay explained, "Call it a tradition. I mean, we certainly don't need the money. I deal in gold coins—you know, doubloons, moidore—obtained when the price was right. A steal, you might say. So, yes, we live well." He looked at his guest. "And what do you do for a living, Mr. Sorley?"

Sorley wasn't listening. For a moment he thought he'd noticed something small move behind Mr. Kay, back there in the corner where two eight-foot-long bamboo poles were leaning, and was watching to catch sight of it again. When Mr. Kay repeated his question Sorley told him what he did and briefly related his adventures connected with the aborted article.

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Mr. Kay laughed like thunder, slapped his knees, and said, "Then we are indeed well met. If you like, I'll tell you the whole story about the Christmas Triangle. What an evening we have ahead of us, Mr. Sorley. Outside a storm howls and butts against the windows. And here we sit snug by the fire with hot drinks in our fists, a willing taleteller and . . ."

" . . . an eager listener," said Sorley, congratulating himself once again on how well things had worked out. He might get his article yet.

Mr. Kay toasted his guest silently, thought for a moment, and then began. "Now years ago, when piracy was in flower, a gangly young Canadian boy named Scattergood Crandal who had run off to join the pirate trade in the Caribbean finally earned his master-pirate papers and set out on a life's journey in buccaneering. But no pantywaist, warm-water pirating for him, no rummy palm-tree days under blue skies. Young Crandal dreamed of home, of cool gray summers plundering the shipping lanes of the Great Lakes, of frosty winter raiding parties skating up frozen rivers with mufflers around their necks and cutlasses in their teeth, surprising sleeping townspeople under their eiderdowns.

"So with his wife's dowry Crandal bought a ship, the *Olson Nickelhouse,* and sailed north with his bride, arriving in the Thousand Islands just as winter was closing the St. Lawrence. The captain and his wife and crew spent a desperate four months caught in the ice. Crandal gave the men daily skating lessons. But they were slow learners and there were to be no raiding parties that winter. By the end of February, with supplies running low, the men ate the captain's parrot. And once having eaten talkative flesh, it was a small step to utter cannibalism. One snowy day Crandal came upon them dividing up the carcasses of three ice fishermen. He warned them, 'Don't do it, you fellows. Eating human flesh'll stunt your growth and curl your toes!' But it was too late. Those men were already slaves to that vile dish whose name no menu dares speak."

As Mr. Kay elaborated on the hardships of that first year he took his guest's glass, busied himself with the rum and hot water, and made them both fresh drinks. For his part, Sorley was distracted by bits of movement on the edges of his vision. But when he turned to look, there was never anything there. He decided it was only the jitters brought on by fatigue from his long drive in bad weather. That and the play of light from the fire.

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"Now Crandal knew terror was half the pirate game," continued Mr. Kay. "So the loss of the parrot hit him hard. You see, Mr. Sorley, this Canadian lad had never mastered the strong language expected from pirate captains and counted on the parrot to hold up that end of things. The blue jay he later trained to stride his shoulder hadn't quite the same effect and was incredibly messy. Still, pirates know to go with the best they have. So he had these flyers printed up announcing that Captain Crandal, his wife (for Mrs. Crandal was no slouch with the cutlass on boarding parties), and his cannibal crew, pirates late of the Caribbean, were now operating locally, vowing Death and Destruction to all offering resistance. At the bottom he included a drawing of his flag, a skeleton with a cutlass in one bony hand and in the other a frying pan to underscore the cannibal reference.

"Well, the flyer and flag made Crandal the hit of the season when things started up again on the Lakes that spring. In fact, the frying pan and Crandal's pale, beanpole appearance and his outfit of pirate black earned him the nickname Death-Warmed-Over. And as Death-Warmed-Over the Pirate he so terrorized the shipping lanes that soon the cold booty was just rolling in, cargoes of mittens and headcheese, sensible swag of potatoes and shoes, and vast plunder in the hardware line, anvils, door hinges, and barrels of three-penny nails which Crandal sold for gold in the colorful and clamorous thieves' bazaars of Rochester and Detroit."

"How about Niagara Falls?" asked Sorley, to show he knew how to play along with a tall tale. He was amused to detect a slur in his voice from the rum.

"What indeed?" smiled Mr. Kay, happy with the question. He rose and lifted the painting down from its nail above the mantel and rested it across Sorley's knees. "See those iron rings along the water line? We fitted long poles through them, hoisted the *Olson Nickelhouse* out of the water, and made heavy portage of her around the falls."

As Mr. Kay replaced the painting Sorley noticed that the group of three pirates on the mantel had rearranged themselves. Or was the strong drink and the heat from the fire affecting his concentration?

"Well," said Mr. Kay, "as cream rises, soon Crandal was Pirate King with a pirate fleet at his back. And there was no manjack on land or sea that didn't tremble at the mention of Death-Warmed-Over. Or any city either. Except for one.

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"One city on the Canadian side sat smugly behind the islands in its bay and resisted Crandal's assaults. Its long Indian name with a broadside of o's in it translated out as 'Gathering Place for Virtuous Moccasins.' But Crandal called it 'Goody Two-Shoes City' because of its reek of self-righteousness. Oh, he hated the world as a pirate must and wished to do creation all the harm he could. But Goody Two-Shoes City he hated with a special passion. Early on he even tried a Sunday attack to catch the city by surprise. But the inhabitants came boiling out of the churches and up onto the battlements to pepper him with cannonballs with such a will that, if their elected officials hadn't decided they were enjoying themselves too much on the Sabbath and ordered a cease-fire, they might have blown the *Olson Nickelhouse* out of the water."

Here Mr. Kay broke off his narrative to poke the fire and then to stare into the flames. As he did, Sorley once again had the distinct impression he was being watched. He turned and was startled to find another grouping of little pirate statues he hadn't noticed before on a shelf right at the level of his eye in the bookcase beside the fireplace. They held drawn dirks and cutlasses in their earnest little hands and had pistols stuck in their belts. And, oh, what ugly little specimens they were!

"Then, early one December," Mr. Kay continued, "Crandal captured a cargo of novelty items from the toy mines of Bavaria. Of course, in those days toys were quite unknown. Parents gave their children sensible gifts like socks or celluloid collars or pencil boxes at Christmas. Suddenly Crandal broke into a happy hornpipe on the frosty deck, for it had come to him how he could harm Goody Two-Shoes City and make it curse his name forever. But he would need a disguise to get by the guards at the city gate who had strict orders to keep a sharp eye out for Death-Warmed-Over. So he changed his black outfit for a red one with a pillow for fatness, rouge for his gray cheeks, a white beard to make him look older, and a jolly laugh to cover his pirate gloom. Then, on Christmas Eve, he put the *Olson Nickelhouse* in close to shore and sneaked into Goody Two-Shoes City with a wagonload of toys crated up like hymnals. That night he crept across the rooftops and down chimneys and by morning every boy and girl had a real toy under the Christmas tree.

"Well, of course, the parents knew right away who'd done the deed and what Crandal was up to. Next Christmas, they knew, they'd have to go and buy a toy in case Crandal didn't show up again or risk a disappointed child. But suppose he came next year,

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too? Well, that would mean that the following year the parents would have to buy two toys. Then three. And on and on until children no longer knew the meaning of the word 'enough.'

" 'Curse Crandal and the visit from the *Olson Nickelhouse,*' the parents muttered through clenched teeth. But their eavesdropping children misheard and thought they said 'Kris Kringle' and something about a visit from 'Old Saint Nicholas.' As if a saint would give a boy a toy drum or saxophone to drive his father mad with, as if a saint would give a girl a Little Dolly Clotheshorse doll and set her dreaming over fashion magazines when she should be helping her mother in the kitchen." Mr. Kay laughed until the tears came to his eyes. "Well, the Pirate King knew he'd hit upon a better game than making fat landlubbers walk an icy gangplank over cold gray water. And since the Crandals had salted away a fortune in gold coins they settled down here and started a reindeer farm so Crandal could Kringle full-time with the missus as Mrs. Kringle and the crew as his little helpers." Mr. Kay looked up. "Isn't that right, Mother?"

Mrs. Kay had appeared in the doorway with a red costume and a white beard over her arm and a pair of boots in her hand. "That's right, Father. But it's time to get ready. I've loaded the sleigh and harnessed the reindeer."

Mr. Kay got to his feet. "And here's the wonderfully strange and miraculous thing, Mr. Sorley. As the years passed we didn't age. Not one bit. What did you call it, Mother?"

"The Tinker Bell Effect," said Mrs. Kay, putting down the boots and holding up the heavily padded red jumpsuit trimmed with white for Mr. Kay to step into.

"If children believe in you," explained Mr. Kay, as he did up the Velcro fasteners, "why then you're eternal and evergreen. Plus you can fly through the air and so can your damn livestock!"

Mrs. Kay laughed a fine contralto laugh. "And somewhere along the line children must have started believing in Santa's little helpers, too," she said. "Because our pirate crew didn't age either. They just got shorter."

Mr. Kay nodded. "Which fitted in real well with their end of the operation."

"The toy workshop?" asked Sorley.

Mr. Kay smiled and shook his head. "No, that's only a myth. We buy our toys, you see. Not that Mother and I were going to spend our own hard-earned money for the damn stuff. No, the crew's little

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fingers make the counterfeit plates to print what cash we need to buy the toys. Electronic ones, mostly. Wonderful for stunting the brain, cramping the soul, and making ugly noises that just won't quit."

"Hold it." Sorley wagged a disbelieving finger. "You're telling me you started out as Death-Warmed-Over the Pirate and now you're Santa Claus?"

"Mr. Sorley, I'm as surprised as you how things worked out. Talk about revisionism, eh? Yesterday's yo-ho-ho is today's ho-ho-ho." Mr. Kay stood back and let his wife attach his white beard with its built-in red plastic cheeks.

"But where does the Christmas Triangle business fit in?" demanded Sorley. "We've got twenty-seven people who disappeared around here last year alone."

"Copycats," insisted Mr. Kay. "As I said, Mother and I only take one a year, what we call our Gift from the Night. But of course, when the media got onto it the copycats weren't far behind. Little Mary Housewife can't think of a present for Tommy Tiresome who has everything, so she gives him a slug from a thirty-eight between the eyes and buries him in the basement, telling the neighbors he went to visit his mother in Sarnia. Little Billy Bank Manager with a shortage in the books and a yen for high living in warmer climes vanishes into the Christmas Triangle with a suitcase of money from the vault and reemerges under another name in Rio. And so on and so on. Copycats."

"Father's right. We only take one," said Mrs. Kay. "That's what our agreement calls for."

Mr. Kay nodded. "Last year it was an arrogant young bastard from the SPCA investigating reports on mistreated reindeer. Tell me my business, would he?" Mr. Kay's chest swelled and his eyes flashed. "Well, Mother and I harnessed him to the sleigh right between Dancer and Prancer. And his sluggard backside got more than its share of the lash that Christmas Eve, let me tell you. He was blubbering like a baby by the time I turned him over to my scurvy crew."

"I don't understand," said Sorley. But he was beginning to. He stood up slowly, utterly clearheaded and sober. "You mean your cannibal crew ate him?" he demanded in a horrified voice.

"Consider the fool from the SPCA part of our employee benefits package," shrugged Mr. Kay. "Oh, all right," he conceded when he saw Sorley's outrage, "so my little shipmates are evil. Evil. They've

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got wolfish little teeth and pointed carnivore ears. And don't think those missing legs and arms were honestly come by in pirate combat. Not a bit of it. There's this game they play. Like strip poker but without the clothes. They're terrible, there's no denying it. But you know, few of us get to pick the people we work with. Besides, I don't like to be judgmental. No matter what you've heard, Santa doesn't give a damn about naughty or nice."

Sorley's voice was shrill and outraged. "But this is hideous. Hideous. I'll go to the police."

"Go, then," said Mr. Kay. "Be our guest. Mother and I won't stand in your way."

"You'd better not try!" warned Sorley defiantly, intending to storm from the room. But when he tried he found his shoelaces were tied together. He fell forward like a dead weight and struck his head, blacking out for a moment. When he regained consciousness he was lying on his stomach with his thumbs lashed together behind his back. Before Sorley's head cleared he felt something being shoved up the back of his pant legs, over his buttocks, and up under his belt. When they emerged out beyond the back of his shirt collar he saw they were the bamboo poles that had been leaning in the corner.

Before Sorley could try to struggle free, a little pirate appeared close to his face, a grizzled thing with a hook for an arm, little curly-toed shoes, and a bandanna pulled down over the pointed tops of its ears. With a cruel smile it placed the point of its cutlass a menacing fraction of an inch from Sorley's left eyeball and in language no less vile because of the tiny voice that uttered it, the creature warned him not to move.

Mrs. Kay was smiling down at him. "Now don't trouble yourself over your car, Mr. Sorley. I'll drive into the city later tonight and park it where the car strippers can't miss it. Father'll pick me up in the sleigh on his way back."

Mr. Kay had been stamping his boots to get them on properly. Now he said, "Give us a kiss, Mother. I'm on my way." Then the toes of the boots hove into view on the edge of Sorley's vision. "Goodbye, Mr. Sorley," said his host. "Thanks for coming. Consider yourself grist for the mills of Christmas."

As soon as Mr. Kay left the room, Sorley heard little feet scramble around him and more little pirates rushed to man the ends of the bamboo poles in front of him. At a tiny command the crew put the cutlasses in their teeth and, holding their arms over their heads,

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hoisted Sorley up off the floor. He hung there helplessly, suspended front and back.

The little pirates lugged Sorley out into the hall and headed down the carpet toward the front door. He didn't know where they were taking him. But their progress was funereally slow, and, swaying there, Sorley conceived a frantic plan of escape. He knew his captors were tiring under their load. If they had to set him down to rest, he would dig in with his toes and, somehow, work his way to his knees. At least there he'd stand a chance.

Sorley heard sleigh bells. He raised his chin. Through the pane of beveled glass in the front door he saw the sleigh on the lawn rise steeply into the night, Christmas tree lights and all, and he heard Mr. Kay's booming "Yo-ho-ho-ho."

Suddenly Sorley's caravan stopped. He got ready, waiting for them to put him down. But they were only adjusting their grips. The little pirates turned him sideways and Sorley saw the open door and the top of the cellar steps and smelled the darkness as musty as a tomb. Then he felt the beginning of their big heave-ho. It was too damn late to escape now. Grist for the mills of Christmas? Hell, he was meat for the stew pots of elfdom.

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It has not been our rule in the past to include anyone previously published in our department of first stories. We make an exception this month because the previous publication of this author is remote in both time and subject matter. Many years ago the author wrote a short story for the romance market and had it published in a magazine in her hometown of Cape Town, South Africa. Since then she has worked exclusively as a poet, with many credits in magazines and a volume consisting solely of her own poetry recently released. The poetic quality of her prose is evident in this stunning crime-fiction debut . . .

THE WHEEL

by FRANCES JOYCE

When I'd put the phone down I stood for a while in thought. I'd been feeling so good I'd begun to feel bad, thinking that Fate must be sneaking up on me in takkies, carrying a sandbag. After the phone call I didn't feel so happy, but I felt relieved, figuring Fate had done her bit and moved off to mug some other customer. Not that it was me she'd clobbered, only a friend of a friend.

I clambered up the narrow winding stairs that led from the bedroom on the second story of the house, outside to the wooden lookout platform above the roof.

The house stood among pine trees near the top of the mountain ridge that formed the spine of the Cape Peninsula. The view would make any estate agent suck in his breath sharply and dream of adding a couple of zeroes behind his usual commission. That is, until the inconvenient distance from neighbours and shopping malls struck him and made him revise his estimate drastically.

Directly in front of me, breathtaking sheer kilometers down, lay False Bay, curving around to the southernmost tip of Africa at Cape

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Aghulhas. A tiny toy battleship was creeping up to Simonstown harbour past a becalmed flotilla of toothpick yachts. And as I watched, a matchbox car inched at a nervous 40 kph round one of the hairpin bends of the mountain pass. The road leading into the pass ran over the crest of the mountain, in front of our house, and then wriggled in hair-raising curves, carved out of the granite, down to Simonstown. One of these days someone was going to overshoot a curve and go sailing out into space. I only hoped I wouldn't be watching when it happened.

I went down to breakfast.

Jake had set out for me some of the special *muesli* he prepared himself in one of his stoneware bowls. When I came into the room I had a back view of his long hair, tied back with a leather thong, his broad shoulders, and tanned hairy calves. Let old aunties tote up his years and stare suspiciously at the glossy raven of his hair—there's a bottle in the bathroom which tells no tales and a man, as well as a woman, has a right to a bit of vanity, say I.

He was examining one of his favourite pieces, which had a striking copper-reduction ash glaze. He'd taken it down from a display shelf that held a number of other cherished pieces—a casserole with a tenmoku glaze, a carved plate in a smoky jade celadon glaze, and others, all of excellent craftsmanship in the classical tradition.

Some pieces of my own were also there. My taste leaned to the wacky modern, with exuberant brushwork and iconoclastic colours that weren't backward in coming forward. Strangely enough, however, I had attracted quite a few admirers of my style.

I kissed Jake on the cheek.

"You haven't shaved."

"Mmm."

We had already reached that stage of intimacy where some remarks are made and received as background noise.

"It's the accidental effects one gets in the glazing process that are so fantastic," he observed, continuing his train of thought out loud. He sighed and replaced the bowl.

"Mrs. Wigtown phoned," I said.

"Who's she? Someone who wants to visit the studio?"

"Oh, of course you wouldn't know her," I said. "She's an old friend of my mother's. She phoned about her daughter."

Jake lost interest. I could see him eyeing a pottery supplier's catalogue. I picked it up and held it behind my back.

"She's worried about her daughter."

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"Which mother isn't? I bet your mom's worried about you right now." He crossed his eyes, hammed a leer, grabbed me, and snuffled in my neck. I laughed and pulled away.

"Apparently she ran off with some man who was travelling up to Jo'burg and now the man's returned to Cape Town and says she was never with him in the first place. . . ."

"Why did they think she'd run off with him?"

"She left a note. But she didn't mention the man's name. Mrs. Wigtown assumed it was Neil, but it turns out it wasn't, so now she's afraid something bad has happened. She's in a terrible state. It's been over three months now that she's missing."

"Three months, and she's only worried now?"

"This has happened before, she says. The girl drops her mother a line and takes off on some pleasure jaunt. The family has money and they've spoilt her, half the time they don't know where she is. But it's never been this long before without her phoning or writing."

"She should get in touch with the authorities," Jake commented indifferently. "They'll trace the girl to Durban and find her raving it up on the beachfront with a boyfriend."

"She has. But she wants me to help as well."

"Why you, for heaven's sake?"

"My father was with the police before he died," I said reluctantly.

Jake froze. The police had a reputation, I knew, which made them something totally alien to his life philosophy, which eschewed any kind of violence.

"But . . . you never told me," he protested.

"Well, I knew what your reaction would be, didn't I?" Jake looked at me.

"I mean, you've heard the stories about corruption and people dying in custody. I know the police are not your favourite people. But whatever the case, my dad was one of my favourite people, Jake."

Jake's smile beamed.

"Of course he was, love. Just ignore my prejudices. Anyway, China, what does Mrs. Wigtown want you to do, exactly?"

Jake hadn't suddenly gone bananas. China's the name given me by a Sinophile mother, and actually it turned out quite prophetic, given my interest in pottery. And when the stale jokes about "How-zit, my old China" begin to pall, I comfort myself with the thought that at least she didn't call me something like Tantanarive or Zanzibar.

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"She wants me to fetch a photo of Celeste and show it around, wherever I go. Perhaps someone will recognise her. It's just a long shot."

Jake frowned in thought.

"Hang on a mo. You never said the girl's name before, so I didn't twig. Celeste? Celeste Wigtown? I think I know someone who knows her. If it's the same person, she was messing around with a married man. Better drop the whole thing, China. The doll sounds like bad news to me. If something happened to her she probably deserved it."

"Who told you she was messing around with a married man?"

"Never mind."

"No, but who? Come on, Jake, spill. Mrs. Wigtown's terribly upset. If you'd spoken to her you'd be just as keen as I am to help."

"Poor woman." I saw Jake's eyes soften behind his granny specs. You wouldn't believe what a gentle, kind person he is.

"I think I'll drop by and pick up the photos this afternoon," I thought out loud.

"Well then, if you're serious about this, I guess I can help you," Jake said. "Primula told me. About the married man. The girl's a friend of hers."

"Primula who?"

"Primula, my nephew Dirkie's wife."

I thought for a bit.

"I think I should speak to her, Jake. Not over the phone. In person."

"That's impossible. They live on a farm somewhere wa-a-ay out in the bundu."

Anything outside of Cape Town is the bundu to Jake. I cocked a quizzical eye.

"Near Stellenbosch," he admitted with a grin.

"You'd better write down the address for me."

Grumbling, he groped in his pocket, pulled out an old account (overdue), turned it over, and wrote on the back.

"I'd better phone them to explain and let them know you'll be visiting them." He gave me the address. "Maybe the wife bumped the girl off out of jealousy. I believe she's a real, forgive the expression, bitch."

He padded off on bare feet to the lookout to do his morning push-ups and I took myself and my bowl of cereal off to the studio to ruminate over yesterday's work.

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* * *

Dirkie had a wine farm and the green rows of espaliered grape vines marched across the sloping acres and up the hillside like tramlines to a vanishing point, an essay in perspective that would have had Paolo Uccello rushing for his brush. The house itself was a large white gabled Cape Dutch affair, shaded by the enormous Cape oaks that the hot climate forced to a premature growth. They ripened, rotted before their time, and fell, not unlike some of us southerners.

Like a cluster of dice, the small white labourer's cottages stood to one side of an orchard. As I slowly drove past, a woman and a man were having a confrontation, staring at each other like two angry brown bantams.

"Why do you hit me?" the woman asked. "I want to know the reason."

They stood facing each other in a dark silence. The whole of nature seemed to be waiting, too, for the reason, any reason, for hate and hostility and violence. They would have to wait a long time, I thought.

Primula was waiting for me on the verandah among wooden vats filled with the enormous papery idiot moonfaces of the Christmas flowers. She wasn't my idea of a farmer's wife. She was like a tiny notelet of crispy white paper inscribed with a fine pen that never blotted or smudged. Her finely manicured hands advertised their intention of doing nothing more strenuous than fluttering around a flower arrangement or stirring a teaspoon at a meeting of the Women's Institute.

"Hello, nice to meet you at last. Let's go into the lounge where it's cooler."

Her eyes kept being drawn to meet mine and wincing back, as if I were a hot iron she was testing with her finger, as if she were afraid I would burn something precious.

The lounge overlooked a carpet of green lawn that was anchoring itself with grim determination against the attempt by a fringe of blue and white hydrangea balloons to lift it up and float it skywards.

The maid brought in coffee and scones and I explained to Primula why I needed to speak to her.

"Mrs. Wigtown is distraught, naturally. Jake says you're a friend of Celeste's?"

"Oh, yes, I've known her for ages."

"Did she tell you she was going away?"

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"No, she never mentioned it. The first I heard was when I hadn't seen her for some time. I phoned her home and her mom told me she'd gone off to Johannesburg with Neil."

"Did you know she was involved with Neil?"

"Well, no. I knew they were friendly, of course. Played tennis together, and so on, but I never thought it was a heavy affair."

"Then didn't you suspect something was wrong when you were told she'd gone off with him?"

"Do you think I should've? But people, even our closest friends, are so opaque, we never get to know everything about them. And then I've known Celeste to fling off at a moment's notice with some chap. Has it occurred to you that perhaps Neil is lying when he says she was never with him?"

"It's a possibility," I acknowledged. "Though I understand from Mrs. Wigtown that the police have checked him out pretty thoroughly. What about this married man?" I continued. "Where does he come into the picture?"

"I don't know much about that, really. I know she'd recently got into the habit of going to see Dominic Le Grange quite a lot. And she told me the last time I saw her that they were having an affair and his wife knew and was furious. But when she told me she was laughing and evasive, so I had a funny feeling about it. I didn't know whether to believe her or not."

I asked if she had the Le Granges' address. She did and I wrote it down.

"And there was no one else she was seeing seriously, that you know of?"

"No, no one at all," she said vehemently and looked me straight in the eye for the first time, as if double-daring me to doubt her candour.

I've never been able to resist a dare. I'd half risen from my chair, but now I sat down again.

"I wonder if I could talk to Dirkie?" I probed.

Her hands moved as if warding off a blow.

"I'm afraid not. He's out in the vineyards somewhere," she said quickly.

I picked up the spoon she'd brushed off her saucer. Bingo.

"What are you afraid of, Primula?" I asked gently.

Her face crumpled like someone picking up a jigsaw puzzle off a tray, bits falling apart and bits hanging in there, but all screwed up.

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That was when her husband Dirkie flung open the door and ran into the room. He had a gun in his hand and he started shooting.

I screamed.

Primula didn't scream. On the contrary, she looked as if the irruption had startled her back into her composure.

I became aware of Dirkie fussing over me, apologising and patting me on the back.

"It's those bloody stray dogs, girlie. They come sneaking into the garden to steal our dog's leftovers. They're skin and bones and covered with scabs. It's a kindness to shoot the poor brutes. I didn't realise we had a visitor. And Primula's used to me blasting away at them."

Primula nodded with a faint smile. She was used to living with the angel of death.

Over a glass of red wine, their own, I asked Dirkie something that was beginning to obsess me.

"What was Celeste like?"

He repeated my question. "Stunning, she was simply stunning."

"You're using the past tense about her," I observed.

He flushed guiltily.

"She's been gone a long time. Naturally one assumes the worst. But if she's dead, it'll be a terrible tragedy. She was something special. She had, *has,* red-brown hair, like vine leaves in autumn. Blue eyes."

He glared out of the window at the sky as if its colour came in a poor second to Celeste's eyes.

"She had a sparkle finer than champagne, it almost made you tipsy to be with her."

To my embarrassment tears welled up in his eyes which suffused but didn't overflow. I looked away from him and saw Primula. She was looking at him with a mixture of fear and outrage that made her seem almost a mirror image of the labourer's woman I had seen when I drove up to the house.

I stood up, murmuring that I supposed I would have to take the freeway to get to the Le Grange home.

"The freeway?" Dirkie recovered almost instantly. "That's not the quickest way to get there."

He lumbered out, and returned, clutching a map. With a big sunburnt gammon of a hand he traced out the route that I should take.

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"And give my love to Siobhan Le Grange when you see her," he added.

When I left he was standing in the Dutch doorway, staring after me. A large, fleshy man, whose machismo would always lead him to try and impose *his* way on a woman.

A sentimental, violent man who had loved Celeste Wigtown.

Siobhan Le Grange and her husband lived north of Bloubergstrand in a ranch-style house set in large grounds. At her front door I turned around and looked back at the tremendous bulk of Table Mountain that dominated Cape Town and its harbour. A malevolent slow-motion avalanche of white cloud was drifting down its slopes threatening to bury the buildings beneath, then, at the last minute, it faded like an impotent ghost at cockcrow.

I pushed the buzzer without too much hope, thinking everyone was probably out, as the house seemed deserted. But a taciturn maid opened the door and to my question muttered that "Madam was in the grotty."

"I beg yours?"

"In the grotty."

She waved an arm, encompassing grounds as vast and deserted as a football field in the off-season. No attempt had been made at a garden. The land was punctuated by dusty shrubs and heaps of earth that seemed to have been thrown up by giant moles. I walked over for a closer look and saw that the heaps were roughly circular and enclosed potholes. I peered down one into a faintly lit underground room. I looked around. The gradient of a half-concealed ditch indicated a possible entrance to these subterranean caverns, and like a rather hesitant Orpheus I stepped down into it and descended into the underworld.

Hollowed out beneath the ground were interconnected cells which were supported by thick columns of packed earth and rock. Green-leaved plants, ferns, and even small trees had been planted in beds. They seemed to be flourishing and the air had that freshness which only green growing things can give. Light flooding in through the potholes above threw white spotlights on the floor which shaded off into a cool dim haze in the recesses.

As I picked my way towards the small sounds that indicated a presence in the farthest burrow I noticed that each wall was studded with pieces of junk. One large section was reinforced with empty glass bottles turned so that the bottom ends formed round glass

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mosaics. A smaller section, half-completed, was paved with the broken bits of blue and white Chinese pottery that one finds everywhere in Cape Town, the ancient shards from the pottery in the holds of ships wrecked in the storms of Table Bay.

Siobhan Le Grange was waiting for me in the last chamber. In the gloom I could hardly make out more than her rather thickset figure. She was holding what looked like a very sharp digging tool in her hand.

I told her the maid had said I should find her there.

"This place is fantastic!" I exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it."

"It started in a very small way, just for a lark. Now I don't seem able to stop. And the word's spread, so people come from all over to see it." There was a white flash of teeth. "It's not really so strange. There are precedents. The poet Alexander Pope, for instance. He had a grotto in his villa at Twickenham."

I told her that I was a friend of Mrs. Wigtown.

"She's desperately worried about her daughter and she asked me to find out anything I could from people who know her."

"Celeste? But she went up to Johannesburg with Neil, didn't she? So I heard."

"Neil's returned and says she was never with him."

"I see. That's odd. She never said anything to me about her plans. I'm afraid I can't help you."

"By the way," I said, "Dirkie sends love."

"Oh, thanks. How are they?"

"They seem fine. That's more than I can say about the stray dogs that wander within shooting distance of the farmhouse."

She knew all about his habits.

"I've told him time and again: One day he'll shoot someone by accident."

"You know something funny? I happened to glance out the window just before he rushed in and started blazing away with the gun. And I didn't see any dog out there."

In the silence I could hear a trickle of earth running down a wall. Then she said:

"I've sometimes thought, there's something not quite right with Dirkie. You know about his mother?"

"No."

"His mother died in a car accident. She was driving with another man, not her husband, and the car went over the edge of Chapman's

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Peak Pass. Some of us knew about this boyfriend and knew he'd grown tired of her and wanted out. The thought was, perhaps it wasn't an accident, but no one ever said anything."

The son had certainly inherited the mother's propensity to violence, I thought.

"To get back to Celeste," I said aloud. "Do you think I could speak to your husband? He might have some idea where she's gone."

"No."

"No, I can't see him?"

"No, he knows even less than I do about where she is, I'm sure of that."

"I was told that your husband was quite close to Celeste."

The thickset figure shifted on her feet.

"Just what are you implying?"

I decided to let her have it straight.

"Celeste told a close friend that she was having an affair with your husband, Mrs. Le Grange."

I heard her draw in her breath sharply.

"She also told this friend that you were furiously jealous of their relationship."

"But . . . "

I brushed aside her attempted protest.

"This place is almost like a catacomb." I shivered. "Is anyone buried here, Mrs. Le Grange?"

"You're accusing me of murder? Or is it my husband you think killed Celeste?"

"You pays your money and you takes your choice. *You* tell *me*."

She came looming out of the dusk towards me and I was very aware of the knife-edged tool in her hand. I backed away.

Suddenly she stopped and burst out laughing.

My scalp crawled as I wondered for a moment whether she was insane. But the light was now falling directly onto her face and standing before me I saw a perfectly normal middle-aged woman, a mixture of amusement and anxiety in her eyes.

"But neither of us would ever harm Celeste! The so-called 'affair' was just a joke," she protested. "Only now, if she's disappeared, the joke's turning sour. Please believe me," she said earnestly. "My husband and I are very happily married. I'm not denying that Celeste could usually take her pick of men, but she wasn't interested in Dominic and, believe it or not, he preferred fat old me. It was

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just a little game, to pretend she was in love with him, and I played along, pretending to be jealous."

"I don't believe you and thousands wouldn't," I said.

"I *liked* Celeste! We had a lot in common."

"Such as."

"Well, for instance, we'd both had a relationship with the same man. A thing that had gone bad. We liked to gossip together and bitch about him, us girls. You know what it's like. Are you perhaps married?" She glanced at my hand.

"I'm living with someone at the moment. We're thinking of making it legal. Have you heard of Jake Senekal, the potter?" I asked, not without some pride.

Mrs. Le Grange looked at me in amazement. I wasn't surprised she knew him, he'd won awards for his work and been written up in the papers. He was a prominent figure in the art world.

"But China, has no one told you?" She hesitated. "I was married to Jake years ago, but I divorced him."

I suddenly felt how cold it was down there, where the sun didn't shine.

"I . . . no . . . Jake never said . . ."

I trailed a finger absently down a wall gleaming with silver shards of mirrors. In dozens of shattered fragments my face winked whitely and mockingly back at me.

"Then . . . was Jake the man . . . you and Celeste used to bitch about?"

Siobhan's eyes were huge and dark with concern.

"Yes. They were involved for a while and then Celeste decided she'd had enough. It lasted a very short time and I don't think anyone knew about it. I'm sure Jake doesn't know I know."

"He doesn't."

"There you are. Only Jake and Celeste and I were in on the secret."

"And Primula," I corrected her slowly. "Celeste's close friend Primula."

Jake often works at night. There was a light on in the studio when I got back. I fetched something that I needed in the house and then I went to find him.

I walked into the studio and looked around at the place that had been so familiar to me. I seemed to be seeing it all through the wrong end of a telescope, the plastic-covered mounds of clay, the

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work benches, the shelves filled with unfired and biscuit-fired pottery, the walk-in gas-fired kiln, the throwing wheels . . .

Jake was sitting at a throwing wheel, centering a lump of clay. He looked up when I entered.

You can say all you like about what a wonderful instrument speech is. Perhaps you'd be right. All I can say is, for instantaneous comprehensive communication you can't beat that little old look.

Jake looked at me. I looked at Jake. He knew I knew. I knew he knew I knew. He knew . . . Oh, forget it. He looked down and went on turning the wheel for something to do. I stood in front of him.

"You were in love with Celeste."

"Perdutamente, as the Italians say." His smile was bitter as blackened potatoes.

"Why do your women all walk out on you, Jake?" I wondered aloud. "First Siobhan, then Celeste, now me. Is there something they sense about you? Something rotten?"

Impassive, as if he were all alone in the studio, Jake went on raising his fragile walls of whirling clay.

"It was ecstasy," I suggested. "Then suddenly it was over. You phoned Primula, you were desperate to hear news about her. Primula told you she'd already found a substitute, a married man, and ironically, the husband of your ex-wife. You managed to speak to Celeste and persuaded her to meet you here one last time. Did you hope to convince her to return to you and then, when she refused, you quarreled and killed her? Or did you cold-bloodedly plan to make sure that if she wouldn't take you back no one else would have her?"

I could hear the crickets outside shaking maracas at the stars. Bully for them.

Jake was narrowing the walls of the vessel, collaring the clay with both hands. His hands were well shaped and strong, they encircled the soft clay and slowly squeezed.

"You strangled her," I guessed. "She'd told you about the friends in her circle. You knew Neil was going to Jo'burg. You forged a typed note from her that said she was going off with a man. You knew it would be assumed she was with Neil. You needed to give yourself time, to confuse the issue. You went out to her home and tossed the note through the burglar bars of an open window onto her bed. To confuse the issue even more you needed to take up with another woman. I came along, naive little China."

There was a protesting movement from Jake which I ignored.

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"It must have seemed as if Nemesis had struck, to have Celeste's mother phone me, of all people. And then to learn that my father had been in the police force. That really shook you. Maybe you even thought I was on to you and had kept back the information about my dad for that reason.

"At first you tried to discourage me from making enquiries about Celeste," I went on. "Then I mentioned I was going to fetch a photograph of her and show it around. You knew someone here, a servant perhaps, might have recognised her, so you tried to divert me by telling me what Primula had told you about the married man. When I insisted on seeing Primula you phoned her and warned her to keep quiet about you and Celeste. You didn't realise, did you, that Celeste's big 'affair' with Dominic Le Grange was all a silly joke."

Light flashed from Jake's glasses as his head snapped up to stare at me.

"And you didn't realise that not only was Siobhan, your ex-wife, not jealous of Celeste, but in fact they had had an all-girls-together exchange of gossip about you. You thought that by directing me to Dominic Le Grange you were covering up your tracks, but like a wheel of Nemesis turning, you had in fact put me on the circuit that would lead to your exposure."

Jake threw the toggle-ended wire around the base of the vase, twisted it so that it neatly sliced the clay off the wheel, and transferred the finished piece gently to a shelf. With his back towards me, he said:

"You'll have to produce a body to convince the police of your theory, my little China doll. Are you planning to dig up the whole mountainside? I wish you luck."

His voice held amusement, behind which triumph just peeped out and then prudently drew back.

"There's an old Chinese legend," I said imperturbably, "about a potter who was commanded by the emperor to produce a certain beautiful glaze. When batch after batch was a failure he fell into despair and threw himself into his own white-hot kiln. When the kiln cooled down and people opened it, they found all the pieces covered with the exquisite glaze he'd been trying for.

"I can produce Celeste's body, Jake."

I opened my bag and took out the bowl that was Jake's favourite, the bowl with the copper-reduction ash glaze.

"When you had that last fatal meeting you had a bisc batch ready for glaze firing in the kiln. You cleared a space and dragged her

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body inside. Then you fired to stoneware glaze temperature. Anything organic burns up long before that temperature is reached, leaving just ash. And of course any ash that settles on a pot becomes a natural glaze, as all potters know."

I placed the bowl on the wheel where it slowly turned under our riveted eyes.

"I imagine the experts will be able to determine whether the ash in this glaze is human or not."

I stared at the *sang de boeuf* or "oxblood" glaze that gleamed on the sides and shone in a dark red pool at the bottom of the bowl.

"It looks just like blood, doesn't it?" I shuddered.

Then I shuddered again as I became aware of Jake standing behind me. I felt his hands brush the hairs on the nape of my neck and my blood thrilled with ice.

"What's to stop me killing you?" he wondered.

"Nothing. You've already killed part of me, Jake. Kill all of me and I'll be able to say, like the poet John Berryman, 'And then I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.'

"Of course, I've spoken to the police," I added as an afterthought.

With one sweeping movement, Jake threw the Celeste bowl across the room, where it smashed against the wall.

With another violent crash he flung open the studio door and plunged into the night.

I heard his car rev up. Then it roared down the dirt track and onto the main road.

I walked slowly up the wooden stairs to the lookout above the roof. I stood and watched as the lights of a matchbox car, like a distress signal, glowed and disappeared, glowed and disappeared, following the sharp turns of the pass down the mountain.

I was still watching when they seemed to leap out into space, wheeling in a slow circle like sad searchlights probing the empty heavens. Then, in a Catherine wheel of spark and flame, they were extinguished forever on the rocks far below, and Jake found the same way out as his sister, Dirkie's mother, had, years before.●

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

A welcome new publisher has been auspiciously launched with a trade paperback edition of a previously unpublished John Dickson Carr radio serial, *Speak of the Devil* (Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505-9315, $12.95), presented by the BBC early in 1941. Set in England and France in 1816, the suspenseful and masterfully constructed tale offers the apparent impossibilities and seeming supernatural manifestations expected of its author, and Tony Medawar's introduction is a useful summary of Carr's pioneering contribution to historical detective fiction. The script reads beautifully and must have played even better.

The guiding force behind Crippen & Landru is Douglas G. Greene, a distinguished critic and scholar of detective fiction who has edited several volumes of Carr's stories and scripts since 1980 and whose major biography of the locked-room master will be published by Otto Penzler in 1995. The new publisher will specialize in short-story collections with volumes to come by Margery Allingham, Edward D. Hoch, Marcia Muller, and others.

**** Robert Irvine: *The Hosanna Shout,* St. Martin's, $19.95. Even posthumously, Salt Lake City private eye Moroni Traveler's wolf-crying former girlfriend Claire Benyon is able to cause trouble and spring new surprises. A small boy being raised in a dying town in copper-mining country may be the offspring (father unknown) whom Claire named after Traveler and whom Traveler's father Martin wishes to claim as his grandchild. The father-son team become involved in local politics and social life, including a memorable game of touch football at a town picnic, followed by murder. Back in Salt Lake, the struggle is on to save the historic Chester Building from demolition on the basis of a ceiling mural that may be by Thomas Hart Benton. The plot is fine, the insights into Utah and its people better.

**** Sharyn McCrumb: *She Walks These Hills,* Scribners, $21.00. The third in McCrumb's Appalachian series is a masterpiece of complex construction, intercutting among several major characters (among them Sheriff Spencer Arrowood, newly assigned field deputy Martha Ayers, a radio talk-show host known as Hank the Yank, an elderly escaped convict lacking short-term memory, and a quixotic backpacking academic trying to relive history) and addressing three murder problems: one in the present, one from the late 1960s, and one from 1789, involving a girl who was kidnapped by the Shawnees and escaped to make her way home. An elegy to a vanishing culture with a wealth of character insights and a touch of the supernatural, this novel

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ranks with the best books by one of the mystery genre's stellar performers.

**** Ed Gorman: *Blood Moon,* St. Martin's, $20.95. Intricate construction is also the order of the day in the first in a projected series about Robert Payne, former FBI agent, now a private investigator specializing in psychological profiles of serial killers. Payne goes to New Hope, Iowa, to check on three suspects identified by a former (now dead) colleague in a series of rape/murders of teenage girls; alternating with his narrative are the grimly fascinating but apparently unrelated prison experiences of an unnamed convict. When the connection between the two storylines becomes clear, Gorman still has a series of well-calculated surprises in store, plus an unusually grueling and suspenseful climax. The worldview is typical of Gorman: an uncompromising, unprettified account of violence and human evil counterbalanced by a persistent hope and optimism.

*** Thomas D. Davis: *Murdered Sleep,* Walker, $21.95. Private eyes often land in the hospital, usually at the end of the book, following a horrific action finale, and sometimes in the middle of the book, where they demonstrate their remarkable ability to rebound quickly by leaving early against doctor's orders. In his second case, Dave Strickland *begins* in the hospital and spends the whole book dealing with the effects of a serious head injury and with nightmares and panic attacks, as well as with the case at hand: finding the assailant of the twelve-year-old girl he received his injuries rescuing and the murderer of her drug-dependent mother several years before. The novel is unconventional in other ways, having a strong religious subtext and basing its puzzle on the interpretation of dreams. You may guess the killer early on, but you'll be enthralled by Davis's intense prose and the momentum of his story.

*** Gillian Roberts, *How I Spent My Summer Vacation,* Ballantine, $20. Amanda Pepper, English teacher in a Philadelphia prep school, is a politically correct equivalent of the old radio-TV character Our Miss Brooks—the late Eve Arden would have done a wonderful job reading the self-kidding narration. Appropriately to her amateur detecting proclivities, Mandy has a Southern-accented cop rather than a bashful biologist for a boyfriend. Some of the jokes may be a bit strained, but the background of Atlantic City, with its depressing similarity to Las Vegas, comes to life; the action scenes are exciting, and the overall result is a highly entertaining pure whodunit. The pseudonymous author writes mainstream fiction as Judith Greber.

*** Frederick D. Huebner: *Methods of Execution,* Simon & Schuster, $22. The fifth novel about Seattle lawyer Matthew Riordan finds him burned out and retired from law practice—until former lover Liz Kleinfeldt asks him to join the death sentence appeal of Robert Polhaus, a sadist she knows to be evil but believes is innocent of the serial murders he was convicted of. This is a strong contribution to the legal thril-

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ler genre, with a tricky mystery plot to go with its serious and unflinching consideration of legal ethics.

*** Melodie Johnson Howe, *Beauty Dies,* Viking, $19.95. Private detective Claire Conrad, acknowledged as a thin, mobile, and female version of Nero Wolfe, and her feminist Archie, Maggie Hill, go to New York for their lively second case, set in the world of high-toned modeling and the lower-toned sex business. It may be because I came to this novel's charming narrative fresh from sampling the numbingly awful prose of several lesser writers who regularly squat on the bestseller lists, but I found this book much more amusing and enjoyable than I remember the first Conrad case, the Edgar-nominated *The Mother Shadow* (1989), being.

Speaking of Wolfe and Rex Stout, for years I've been saying, in print and out, that the 1969 novel *Death of a Dude* is much the weakest of the original Nero Wolfe series. A rereading of the recent reprint (Bantam, $4.99), with an introduction by Western novelist Don Coldsmith, spurs me not to reverse myself entirely but to assert that if this *is* the worst Wolfe, the series maintained extraordinarily high quality. Narrator Archie Goodwin writes rings around any of his present-day imitators, and the account of Wolfe's unlikely visit to Lily Rowan's Montana cattle ranch gives added insights into the Great Detective's conception of the sacred relationship of host and guest. If the plot is relatively weak, that is true of many of Stout's mysteries.

Though occasional short stories by Czech author Karel Capek (1890—1938) have appeared in *EQMM* as long ago as the international issue of August 1948, he is better known in this country as playwright and science fiction writer, author of the 1920 robot play *R.U.R.*, than as a crime fiction writer. Sampling the stories in Norma Comrada's new translation of *Tales from Two Pockets* (Catbird Press, 16 Windsor Road, North Haven, CT 06473; $14.95) gives an idea of what we have been missing. As the translator points out in her introduction, Capek used the trappings of mystery fiction to illuminate character more than to present fully-plotted puzzles, but that should not discourage potential readers. The tales are small ironic gems of humor and human insight. In *A Catalogue of Crime* (revised edition, 1989), Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor write of the 1932 English edition, "Any literary flavor that one might expect . . . has somehow disappeared in the translation." In this new translation, the literary flavor has apparently reappeared.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

RON GOULART

Ron Goulart is at home in virtually every nook of the crime field. He is an historian of the early pulp magazines and comic strips, in both of which the mystery genre has roots; he is a novelist whose works appear in both hardcover and paperback with several major houses; he is an amateur cartoonist whose subjects often involve crime; and, as longtime EQMM *readers will know, he is a short-story writer whose connections with* EQMM *go back to the days of the magazine's first editor and founder. He joins us here with an offbeat tale of a Santa Claus dummy . . .*

BELIEVING IN SANTA

by RON GOULART

As it turned out, he didn't get a chance to murder anybody. He did make an impressive comeback, revitalizing his faltering career and saying goodbye to most of his financial worries. But in spite of all that, there are times when Oscar Sayler feels sad about not having been able to knock off his former wife.

Twenty-five years ago Oscar had been loved by millions of children. Well, actually, they adored his dummy, Screwy Santa, but they tolerated Oscar. For several seasons his early morning kid show was the most popular in the country, outpulling Captain Kangaroo and all the other competition. Multitudes of kids, and their parents, doted on Oscar's comic version of Santa Claus and tried to live by the show's perennial closing line—"Gang, try to act like it was Christmas every day!"

For the past decade and more, though, Oscar hadn't been doing all that well. In early December of last year, when he got the fateful

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phone call from the New York talent agency, he was scraping by on the $25,000 a year he earned from the one commercial voice job he'd been able to come up with lately. Oscar lived alone in a one-bedroom condo in a never-finished complex in New Beckford, Connecticut. He was fifty-five—well, fifty-seven actually—and he didn't look all that awful.

Since he'd given up drinking, his face was no longer especially puffy and it had lost that lobsterish tinge. His hair, which was nearly all his own, still had a nice luster to it. There was, really, no reason why he couldn't appear on television again.

When the agent called him at a few minutes after four P.M. on a bleak, chill Monday afternoon, Oscar was flat on his back in his small tan living room. He'd vowed to complete two dozen situps every day.

He crawled over to the phone on the coffee table. "Hello?"

"Is your son there?"

Oscar pulled himself up onto the sofa arm, resting the phone on his knees. "Don't have a son. My daughter, however, is the noted television actress Tish Sale, who stars in the *Intensive Care* soap opera, and hasn't set foot across dear old Dad's threshold for three, possibly four—"

"Spare me," requested the youthful, nasal voice. "You must be Oscar Sayler then. You sounded so old that I mistook you for your father."

"Nope, my dad sounded like this—'How about a little nip after dinner, my boy?' Much more throaty and with a quaver. Who the hell are you, by the way?"

"Vince Mxyzptlk. I'm with Mimi Warnicker & Associates, the crackerjack talent agency."

"Oops." Oscar sat on a cushion and straightened up. "That's a powerful outfit."

"You bet your ass it is," agreed the young agent. "You're not represented at the moment, are you?"

"No, because I find I can get all the acting jobs I want without—"

"C'mon, Oscar, old buddy, you ain't exactly rolling in work right now," cut in Vince disdainfully. "In fact, your only gig is doing the voice of the infected toe in those godawful Dr. Frankel's Foot Balm radio spots." He made a scornful noise.

"I do a very convincing itching toe, Vince. Fact is, there's talk of—"

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"Listen, I can get you tons of work. Talk shows, commercials, lectures, TV parts, eventually some plum movie work. But first you—"

"How exactly are—"

"But first you have got to win your way back into the hearts and minds of the public."

"Just how do I accomplish that, Vince?"

"You just have to sit there with that lamebrained dummy on your knee."

"Screwy Santa? Hell, nobody's been interested in him for years."

"Let me do the talking for a bit, okay? Here's what's under way," continued the agent. *"Have a Good Day, USA!*, which has just become the top morning talk and news show, is planning a six-minute nostalgia segment for this Friday. The theme is 'Whatever happened to our favorite kids' shows?' Something they calculate'll have a tremendous appeal for the Boomers and Busters who make up their pea-brained audience. So far they've signed that old duffer who used to be Captain Buckeroo and—"

"Kangaroo."

"Oscar, are you more interested in heckling me than in making an impressive comeback? Would you prefer to go on living in squalor in that rural crackerbox, to voice tripe for Dr. Frankel throughout the few remaining years of your shabby life?"

"Okay, but his name is Captain Kangaroo, not—"

"Attend to me, Oscar. I assured Liz, who's putting this segment together, that I'd dig you up, wipe off the cobwebs, and have you there bright and early Friday. Can you drag yourself into Manhattan and meet me at the Consolidated Broadcasting headquarters building on Fifty-third no later than six A.M.?"

"Sure, that's no problem."

"Most importantly, can you bring that dimwitted dummy?"

Without more than a fraction of a second of hesitation Oscar answered, "Of course, yeah, absolutely." It didn't seem the right time to tell Mxyzptlk that his former wife, who currently loathed him and had ousted him eleven long years ago from the mansion they once shared, had retained custody of the only existing Screwy Santa dummy in the world. "We'll both see you on Friday, Vince."

It commenced snowing at dusk, a paltry, low-budget snow that didn't look as though it was up to blanketing the condo-complex grounds and masking its raw ugliness.

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Glancing at his wristwatch once more, Oscar punched out his daughter's New York City number.

After four rings there came a twanging noise. "Merry Christmas," said Tish in her sexiest voice. "I'm not able to come to the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name and number, I'll get back to you real soon."

Oscar had been working all afternoon on the voice he was going to use. A mixture of paternal warmth and serious illness. "Patricia, my dear," he began, getting the quaver just about perfect, "this is your dad. Something quite serious has come up and I'd like very much to speak to you, my only child, in the hope that—"

"Holy Jesus," observed his daughter, coming onto the line. "What was that old television show you used to tell me about when I was little? Where they gave the contestants the gong for a rotten perf—"

"The Amateur Hour. Now, kid, I need—"

"Consider yourself gonged, Pop."

"Okay, all right, I overdid it a mite," he admitted. "Yet I do have a serious problem."

"My time is sort of limited, Dad. I'm getting ready for a date. You should've phoned me earlier."

"I assumed you were taping *Intensive Care."*

She sighed. "Didn't you tell me you watched my soap faithfully?"

"I do, kid. It's on my must-see list every day."

"I've been in a coma for two weeks. So I don't have to show up at—"

"Sorry to hear that. Anything serious?"

"Near-fatal car crash. We killed that asshole, Walt Truett, thank God."

"But you'll survive?"

"Sure, with only a touch of amnesia."

Oscar asked, "When are you due to come out of your stupor?"

"Next Thursday."

"I'll start watching, I swear," he promised his daughter. "Now, as to the purpose of this call."

"It's Mom, isn't it?"

"Well, not exactly, kid." He filled her in about the offer from the talent agency and the upcoming appearance on *Have a Good Day, USA!* "This will revive my career."

"You think so? A couple of early morning minutes with a pack of over-the-hill doofers?"

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"It's a shot. The only snag is—well, kid, they insist that I bring Screwy along."

"Obviously. You guys are a team."

"And your dear mother has custody of him."

Tish said, "She's not going to loan him to you."

"She might, if you were to—"

"Nope, she won't. A few months ago, when I noticed him up on a shelf in the mud room, I suggested that—"

"She keeps the most beloved dummy in America in the mud room?"

"In a shoe box," she answered. "And, Dad, Screwy Santa hasn't been beloved for a couple of decades now."

"I know, neither have I," he said ruefully. "But, damn it, he helped pay for that mansion."

"Her romantic novels are paying for things now. Did you notice that *Kiss Me, My Pirate* was number two on the *Times*—"

"I extract the book section from the Sunday paper with surgical gloves and toss it immediately into the trash unopened. To make certain I never see so much as a mention of that slop she cranks out or, worse, a publicity photo of her mottled countenance."

"Let's get back to the point. I suggested to her back then that she return Screwy Santa to you."

"And?"

"You don't want to hear what she said," his daughter assured him. "It had, among other things, to do with Hell freezing over. But can't you dig up another dummy by Friday?"

"Impossible, that's the only one extant. We lost the backup copy during that ill-fated nostalgia tour through the Midwest years ago."

"Couldn't you carve another, since you built the others?"

"Kid, I may've fudged the truth a bit when I used to recount Screwy's history to you," he said. "In reality, the dummies were built by a prop man at the old WWAG-TV studios. And he, alas, is long in his grave."

"This is very disillusioning," Tish complained. "One of the few things I still admired about you, Dad, was your woodcarving ability."

"Listen, couldn't you call Mitzi and tell her that I'm expiring, that I want to be reunited with my dummy for one last time before I go on to glory?"

"She'd burst out laughing if I told her you were about to kick off, Dad. And probably dance a little jig."

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"Okay, suppose we make a business deal with her? Offer the old shrew, say, fifteen percent of the take."

"What take? *Have a Good Day, USA!* pays scale. I know, I did one last year to plug my abortion on *Intensive Care.*"

"You looked terrific on that broadcast."

"You didn't even see it."

"Didn't I?"

"No, and you admitted as much at the time."

"Well, back to my immediate problem."

"Why don't you use one of the old Screwy Santa dolls? They look a lot like the dummy."

"Except they don't have movable mouths."

"It'd be better than nothing. I can loan you mine," she offered. "It's stuffed away in a closet."

"No, kid, I really have to have the real dummy."

"Afraid there's nothing I can do. I mean, if I so much as mention that you need Screwy Santa, Mom's liable to take an axe to him."

"Well, thanks anyway for listening to an old man's woes and—"

"Here comes the gong again," his daughter said. "Anyhow, I have to go put on some clothes. Bye."

After hanging up, he stayed on the sofa and brooded. After about ten minutes he said aloud, "I'll have to outwit Mitzi."

The snow improved the next morning, giving a Christmas-card gloss to the usually dismal view from his small living room window.

At ten A.M. he put the first phase of his latest plan into operation. He phoned his former wife's mansion over in Westport.

"Residence of Mitzi Sunsett Sayler," answered a crisp female voice.

"Yes, how are you?" inquired Oscar in a drawling, slightly British accent. "Ogden Brokenshire here."

"Yes?"

"Ogden Brokenshire of the Broadcasting Hall of Fame. Have I the honor of addressing the esteemed novelist Mitzi Sunsett Sayler herself?"

"Of course not, Mr. Brokenshire. I'm Clarissa Dempster, Mrs. Sayler's secretary."

"I see, my dear. Well, perhaps I can explain my mission to you, child, and you can explain the situation to your employer."

"That depends on—"

"We would like to enshrine Screwy Santa."

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"Enshrine whom?"

"The ingenious dummy that Mrs. Sayler's one-time husband used in the days when he brought joy and gladness to the hearts of—"

"Oh, that thing," said the secretary. "My parents, wisely, never allowed me to watch that dreadful show when I was a child."

"Nonetheless, dear child, our board has voted, unanimously I might add, to place Screwy Santa on permanent display in the museum."

"Hold on a moment. I'll speak to Mrs. Sayler." The secretary went away.

In less than two minutes Mitzi started talking. "Who is this?"

"Good morning, I'm Ogden Brokenshire. As I was explaining to your able secretary, my dear Mrs. Sayler, I'm an executive with the Broadcasting Hall of—"

"You haven't improved at all, you no-talent cheesehead."

"I beg your pardon, madam?"

"Oscar, love, you never could do a believable Brit."

"I don't happen to be British, dear lady. The fact that I was educated in Boston sometimes gives people that impression."

"Forget it, Oscar," advised his erstwhile wife. "I don't know why you want to get your clammy hands on that wooden dornick, but you'll never have him. And, dear heart, if you ever try to communicate with me again—in whatever wretched voice—I'll sick the law on you." She, rather gently, hung up on him.

"Looks like," decided Oscar, "I'm going to need a new plan."

He kept working on plans for nearly an hour, pacing his small living room, muttering, pausing now and then to gaze out at the falling snow.

Then the phone rang.

"Yeah?"

"We have hit a slight snag," announced Vince Mxyzptlk.

"Don't they want me?"

"Sure they want you, old buddy. Hell, they're prowling the lofty corridors at Consolidated crying out for you," said the youthful agent. "In fact, they can't wait until Friday."

"What do you mean—do they want me to do a separate segment on my own?"

"Not exactly. But Liz, *and* her boss, are very anxious to see you tomorrow."

Frowning, Oscar nodded. "An audition, huh?"

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"Sort of, yeah," admitted the agent. "It has nothing, really, to do with you. But when one of their scouts unearthed the clunk who used to be Mr. Slimjim on that *Mr. Slimjim & Baby Gumdrop* turkey, he turned out to weigh three hundred pounds now and possess not a single tooth. So, as you can understand, Oscar, they want to see and hear all these wonderful stars of yesteryear in advance."

"Tomorrow?"

"At three P.M. Is that a problem for you?"

"Not exactly, but I—"

"I'm getting a lot of interest in you. Once you do well on Friday, the jobs will start rolling in."

"I understand, it's only—"

"I needn't remind you, Oscar, that a lot of talents in your present position would kill for this opportunity."

"You're absolutely right," he agreed. "See you tomorrow."

He had a great new plan worked out by three that afternoon. But he had to wait until after dark to get going on it.

Dressed in dark clothes, Oscar slipped quietly out of his apartment and into the lean-to that passed for a garage. As usual, none of the roads in the sparsely inhabited complex had been plowed. The snow was soft, though, and not too high, and Oscar was able to drive down to the plowed lanes and byways of New Beckford without any serious delays.

He drove over to nearby Westport and parked in the lot behind Borneo's. There were only a few spaces left and he could see that the restaurant-bar was packed with people. The food and drink at Borneo's was just passable, but it sat only a half mile over the hill from Mitzi's mansion.

As he was crossing the lot a fire engine went hooting by, headed downhill.

Borneo himself was behind the bar. "Evening, Oscar."

He managed to elbow his way up to a narrow spot at the ebony bar. "The usual."

Borneo scratched at his stomach through the fabric of his bright tropical shirt. "Refresh my memory."

"Club soda, alas."

"Coming up."

Outside in the snowy night another fire engine went roaring by, followed by what sounded like a couple of police cars.

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Oscar hoped all this activity wouldn't foul up his plan. So far everything was going well. People were seeing him, he was establishing an alibi. In another ten or fifteen minutes he'd go back to the john. Then he'd slip out the side door.

Once in the open, he'd make his way down to the mansion. Being careful, of course, that no one noticed him sneaking off.

Mitzi, being a skinflint, and in spite of her great wealth, had never bothered to put in a new alarm system. The original setup was still in place, and he knew how to disarm that.

Okay, once he got inside, after making certain that she was alone, he'd . . . well, he'd use the length of pipe he dug up in the garage this afternoon.

Once Mitzi was dead and done for, he'd gather up enough jewels and valuables to make it look like the usual burglary. Then he'd rescue Screwy Santa from the mud room and get the hell away.

Back here at the parking lot he'd stash the loot in his car, slip unobtrusively back into the place, and tell Borneo he'd had a sudden touch of stomach flu and had to stay back in the bathroom a few minutes.

It wasn't exactly foolproof, but it ought to work. He'd own Screwy again and Mitzi would be gone from his life.

He chuckled at the thought. Yeah, the idea of killing her off had come to him this afternoon and he'd taken to it immediately.

Tish might be a little suspicious about how he came by the dummy. He'd tell her something along the lines that he'd found the heirs of the old defunct prop man at the last minute and, gosh, they had a spare Screwy Santa. He'd always been a gifted liar and conning his daughter wouldn't be all that difficult.

"Don't worry about that now," he told himself.

"How's that?" inquired Borneo, setting a glass of sparkling water down in front of him.

"Nothing, I was just—"

"That must be some fire." Borneo paused to listen as yet another truck went howling by out in the night.

Oscar sipped the club soda, drumming the fingers of his free hand on the dark bar top. He'd make his move in about five minutes.

The phone behind the bar rang and Borneo caught it up. "Borneo's. Huh? Channel eight? Okay." Hanging up, he switched channels on the large television set mounted above the mirror.

And there was Mitzi, glowering out of the screen. Wearing a fuzzy bathrobe and not enough makeup, she was being interviewed by a

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slim black newswoman and gesturing at the mansion that was blazing behind her up across the wide night lawn.

"Good God," muttered Oscar.

"That's just downhill from us," observed Borneo.

"Yeah, I know."

The entire sprawling house was going up in flames.

"What exactly happened, Mrs. Sayler?" the reporter asked her.

"It was that goddamn cheesehead."

"Which cheesehead would that be?"

"Screwy Santa, that abominable dummy."

"I'm not certain that I quite under—"

"Aw, you're too damn young. Everybody is these days. I always knew that dornick would do me in eventually."

"You mean this was arson?"

"I mean, dear heart, that I decided to cremate that loathsome lump of wood. I took him and his shoebox, carried them into the living room, and tossed him into the fireplace."

Oscar pressed both hands to his chest. "There goes my comeback."

Mitzi continued, "Then . . . I don't know. His stupid beard seemed to explode . . . flames came shooting out of the fireplace. They hit the drapes and those caught fire . . . then the damn furniture started to go." She shook her head angrily. "Now the whole shebang is ablaze." Looking directly into the camera, she added, "If you're out there watching, Oscar . . . " She gave him the finger.

Borneo raised his shaggy eyebrows high. "Hey, is she talking to you, Oscar?"

"I'm not in the mood for conversation just now." Abandoning his club soda, he walked out into the night.

His daughter phoned a few minutes shy of midnight. "I didn't want you to worry."

"I'm way beyond worry, kid."

"When I caught the report about Mom's mansion on the news, I figured you'd assume that Screwy Santa was gone."

"Certainly I assumed that. There was Mitzi, fatter than ever, hollering for all the world to hear that my poor hapless creation was the cause of the whole blinking conflagration."

"It was a ringer, Dad."

"Eh?"

"I dropped by to visit Mom this afternoon and when she went away to yell at Clarissa, I substituted my old Screwy Santa doll for

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your dummy," explained Tish. "In a way, I may be responsible for that dreadful fire. The doll's a lot more flammable than—"

"No, there was some parent flap at the time, but we proved beyond a doubt that the dolls were perfectly safe if—"

"I have your dummy here in my apartment."

"You've really got Screwy?"

"Yes, he's sitting on my bed right this minute," she assured her father. "It's lucky I went out there when I did and saved him before Mom got going on her plan to destroy the little guy. Why did you go and telephone her and make it crystal clear that you were in desperate need of him? That was dippy, since it inspired her to destroy him."

"I didn't call her as myself. But somehow she penetrated my—"

"That's because, trust me, you do a terrible British voice. When do you need him?"

"Tomorrow."

"I thought you weren't doing the show until Friday."

"Well, and keep this to yourself, kid, there's a possibility they'll devote a separate seg all to me."

"That would be great."

"So can I pick him up tomorrow?"

"Sure, come by around one and I'll take you to lunch."

"Can't make lunch, because I have some people to see while I'm in the Apple. But I'll pop in, give you a paternal hug, and grab Screwy Santa," he said. "Thanks. You're a perfect daughter."

"Perfect for you, I guess. Bye."

Everything worked out well for Oscar. He did, in fact, do a segment of his own, which ran nearly four minutes, on *Have a Good Day, USA!*. And Vince Mxyzptlk was able to get him an impressive batch of other jobs. At the moment there's also the possibility of a new kid show for Oscar and Screwy Santa on cable.

Oscar was able to leave his forlorn condo for a three-bedroom colonial in Brimstone, Connecticut last month.

While he was packing, he came across the length of pipe he'd intended to use on Mitzi. He slapped it across the palm of his hand a few times and, sighing, tossed it into a carton.

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Although Batya Swift Yasgur sold a short fictionalized work based on her own life to a small magazine in Scotland some years ago, this new short story for EQMM *is her first full-fledged work of fiction. The author is a former social worker whose knowledge of the traumatic situations encountered in that line of work is evident in this story . . .*

ME AND MR. HARRY

by BATYA SWIFT YASGUR

And isn't it just like my parents to mess it all up for me, just when it was so nice?

So I'm sitting here, in that stuffy green room just outside the principal's office, waiting for that fat, blousy lady, the social worker, to talk to me again. Mrs. Morris. Her voice is thick and powdery and sweet like the makeup she smears on her face; her hair is all puffed and twisted and piled on top of her head. When she smiles, her mouth is like a big cave you can fall into.

"You can tell me everything, dear." She leans over her desk and I shrink back into my chair. It's a big armchair, cozy, like a nest, and I'm a little bird snuggling into it. I won't talk. She can't make me.

She's getting rattled. I can tell.

"Wouldn't you like to talk about it?"

Like hell I would. I make my eyes into little slits, flare my nostrils—just a tiny bit—and tighten my lips. The Satanic look, my mother calls it. Gets them every time.

Now Mrs. Morris is even more rattled.

"I'm only here to help you." Her voice shakes some.

Right, lady. And I'm a flying ant. I'll keep my mouth shut, thanks.

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She fidgets with her pen, breathes onto her glasses, and writes something down in a manilla folder. I curl myself up into a ball and sink back farther into the chair.

I want Mr. Harry. That's all.

Mommy comes home early every night now. She never used to. Used to work all the time, and I'd let myself in with the key. Made myself cereal and milk and the TV kept me company till she came home. Then it was why didn't I do my homework, and why didn't I make my bed, and why didn't I sweep. Oh, and why didn't I set the table, didn't I know what a long day she had, and how hard she and Daddy work. Then dinner and bath and bed, maybe two minutes of hello from Daddy before he got on the phone. And I used to lie there wondering whether my math teacher would yell at me again for getting the wrong answer, or my science teacher would laugh at me for my "stupid" mistakes.

Until Mr. Harry. Homework times went by so fast with him. I never even thought of TV when I was over at his house. He always had the yummiest cookies and we'd have a great time eating and watching the birds at his feeder. Or that time we shoveled his walk, and we made that giant snowman with a carrot nose and a funny hat, and then he made me hot chocolate.

I hate it when Mommy tries to help me with my homework. "Let's make this a nice family time!" she chirps brightly. "Then how about some pizza?"

I just want things the way they used to be. I want Mr. Harry back.

I'm smoking again. I lift the cigarettes from Daddy's jacket pocket. Mr. Harry got me to stop. Told me all this stuff about cancer, showed me how a cigarette burned a black hole through his handkerchief, and said the same thing would happen to my lungs. "Who cares," I said, puffing away. That's when he hugged me the first time. I swear, he had tears in his eyes. "I care," he told me. And he did.

Why did they have to go and put him in jail?

They won't even let me call him. Or write. Nothing.

Oops! I'm out of cigarettes. Better go get one before Daddy gets out of the shower.

The court is a great big brick building with so many corridors and hallways it's like one of those mazes we built in science class

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for the poor rats. It's not going to be a trial like on TV, they told me. I'm going to see the judge in his room.

I'm pretty nervous about meeting a judge. I expect someone with a black robe, a big wig, and a hammer, who's going to bang and yell "Order!" all the time. But no, he's a little guy with yellow wispy hair, like an old doll's, when I'd washed it too many times. He keeps making grumpy, harrumphy noises in his throat and wiping his nose with a red handkerchief. There are no armchairs.

"When did you first start going to Harry Wrightson's place?"

Another throat noise, another sniffle. I sit up straighter. I don't have to tell this guy anything, even if he is a judge.

I make my slitted-eye face. I can stare him down.

"Answer the question," my mother says, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

I go on staring.

"Yes, yes." The judge clears his throat. "This is hard for you, I know."

No you don't.

He tries again. "When did he touch you the first time?"

I can't hear those words and keep looking at him. I look at the floor. That day, after I failed my science test, when I cried and Mr. Harry held me, warm and tight and cuddly. Stroked my hair and whispered, "Science isn't what counts. Love is. And you're an expert at that." Oh, and I had to ask him what an "expert" is. And he *didn't* tell me to "go look it up."

The judge is asking another question, but I'm not listening anymore.

The school is running this program called "Bad Touch/Good Touch." Mrs. Morris keeps looking at me while they're play-acting these stupid skits on stage, but I make believe I don't see. Mr. Harry's touching—that wasn't bad. Sure, it felt kind of funny at first. But it was—what was his word—*special*. Because I'm special. He said so.

More dumb doctors. One asks lots of questions, you know, some kind of a test. A little like school, but also different. Boxes to fill in, shapes to complete, splatters of ink on some cards, and he wants to know what they look like to me. My mouth is zipped shut. He keeps shaking his head and writing stuff down in this folder. "No little girl has ever behaved like this in here," he says as I'm leaving.

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Good. I really am special after all.

They think that 'cause I don't talk, I also can't hear. They're saying more and more in front of me.

I keep hearing them talking about me. Whispers, of course. Lots about a "residence." I *did* look that one up, and it means "home." I don't get it. I already have a home. Correction: I have a house. Only at Mr. Harry's did I ever really feel home.

I'm back in the cozy armchair in Mrs. Morris's office. Mommy and Daddy are there too. Mommy keeps crying and wiping her eyes with this gross wet tissue that has big holes and is falling apart. Daddy keeps tapping her on the arm and saying, "Now, Bertha."

"Honey." Mommy sounds quivery, like the wings on the hummingbird outside Mr. Harry's window as he used to hover (now *there's* a nice vocabulary word for you, a free gift from Mr. Harry and me) over his feeder.

I won't even turn to look at her. I let the chair cuddle me.

"Talk to Mrs. Morris!" How many times since it happened have I heard Daddy say that in his "punishment" voice. But nothing can make me talk. Not when they yell. Not when they hit. Not when they cry.

"Don't you want to make sure he doesn't do this to another little girl?"

I almost laugh. What we had, Mr. Harry and me, was just between the two of us. He wouldn't do this with anyone else, 'cause no one is special like me.

Looks like I'm going to be shipped off to this place they call the "residence." Seems like it's some kind of orphanage. I don't get it. My parents are alive. I thought orphan homes are for kids whose parents are dead. Of course, for all I care, they could be. Mr. Harry is gone and that's what matters.

Mommy's eyes are teary all the time, but Daddy does a lot of barking. "Please, honey, won't you even talk to us?" Mommy begs. "You're ruining your life, young lady, I hope you know that!" is all I hear from Daddy.

Who cares.

I hear them talking on the phone. I don't know who they're talking to, but I've picked up on the upstairs extension. They don't know

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I'm listening, of course. Just like they don't know about the time Daddy yelled at Mommy about the bank and the morgidge (is that how you spell it?) in their bedroom, and I was hiding in my spot in the linen closet outside their door. Or that night when I heard all those strange bumps and thumps and groany noises. Or the time Mommy cried when she thought she was going to have another baby. "I can hardly handle one. How am I ever going to manage with two!" I've got eavesdropping down to a science (probably the only science I'll ever be good at).

"What do you mean, they're going to release him?" Daddy's angriest voice.

"Just what I said." The man I don't know is talking.

"But that's outrageous!" Mommy is crying, as usual.

"Your daughter won't talk, so there isn't enough evidence."

"What she said that time, that wasn't enough? That's how we found out about it in the first place!"

"No."

"What about the other little girl? Doesn't her testimony count for something?"

My hand, holding the phone receiver, turns to ice. I'm afraid I'm going to throw up.

And when I hear myself screaming, Mommy and Daddy drop the phone and are running up the stairs. My voice sounds rusty, like a broken machine that's been lying around too long.

"What other little girl?"

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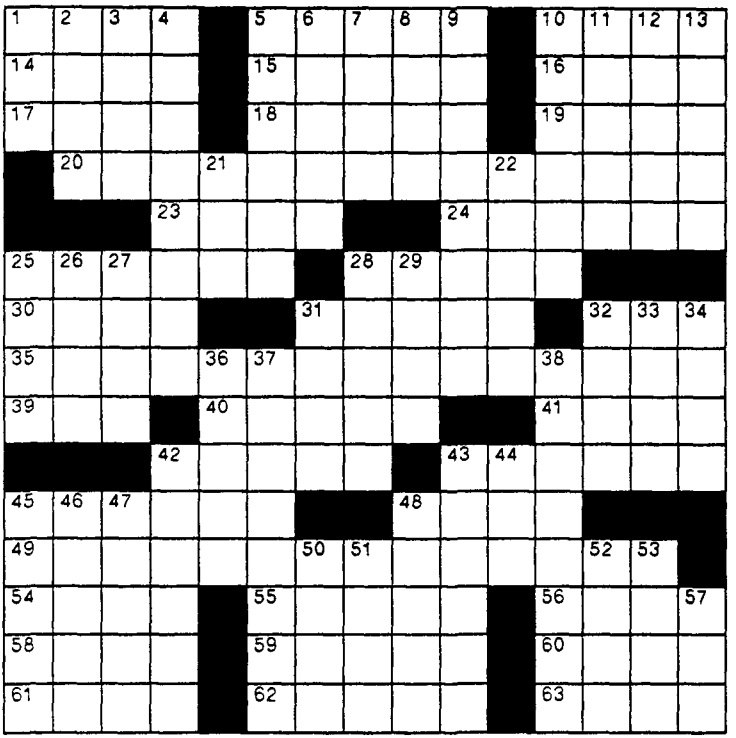
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

By Ruth Minary



Solution on page 115

'TIS THE SEASON

ACROSS

1. Fellow
5. Group of three
10. Talk
14. Nobleman
15. Therefore
16. Canter
17. Ms. Buchanan, author of *Miami, It's Murder*
18. Sped
19. Hebrew measure
20. An appropriate guest, creator of Lady Margaret Priam
23. Heavy blow

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24. Stick together
25. The Lord —— you
28. Some horses
30. Second largest Asian lake
31. Duck, pref.
32. Dickens said he was tiny
35. Preparing for the holiday dinner? (Frances and Richard Lockridge)
39. Superlative suffix
40. Fens
41. English actor, dramatist Coward
42. Caesar's ship
43. Makeshift bed
45. Soar
48. Chinese, comb. form
49. Inappropriate present (Ruth Rendell)
54. Island off Timor
55. Contestants
56. Port in Northern Germany
58. Aid
59. —— a time, singly
60. Supplements, with "out"
61. Ms. Paretsky, creator of V.I. Warshawski
62. Poor
63. —— *You Merry*, Charlotte Macleod writing as Alisa Craig

DOWN

1. Em——
2. Pilgrimage
3. Florence's river
4. Theater program
5. Separate grain from stalk
6. Attain
7. Move slowly
8. Maple genus
9. Consecrate
10. Fabrics
11. Maigret, e.g.
12. Partridge in —— tree
13. Concise
21. *A —— by Any Other Name* Lydia Adamson
22. 1925 Pulitzer Prize novel
25. Dry
26. Goddess who threw the Golden Ball of Discord
27. Mr. Disney
28. Feeds the kitty
29. Stadium sounds
31. Cato's fields
32. Instrument
33. Words of understanding
34. Thaw
36. Japanese porcelain
37. Sculptress Louise
38. Witness
42. Comrade Khrushchev
43. Hog's home
44. *To Love —— Be Wise,* Josephine Tey
45. He had the weight of the world on his shoulders
46. Home of famous Queen
47. Lovesey's namesake sleuth Diamond
48. Golfer Sam
50. Cord
51. French thought
52. *To Die —— a Gentleman,* Robert Barnard writing as Bernard Bastable
53. Robert E.'s family
57. WW II vessel

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Although she debuts for EQMM *this month, Ann Cleeves is no newcomer to the crime scene. Ten of her novels have been published in the United States by Ballantine/Fawcett books, and half of these feature the protagonist of the following story, Chief Inspector Ramsay. Ramsay is called out this time to the far reaches of the countryside surrounding Newcastle, England in the company of an assistant who can't wait to get back to the bustle of a city anticipating Christmas . . .*

A WINTER'S TALE

by ANN CLEEVES

In the hills there had been snow for five days, the first real snow of the winter. In town it had turned to rain, bitter and unrelenting, and in Otterbridge it had seemed to be dark all day. As Ramsay drove out of the coastal plain and began the climb up Cheviot the clouds broke and there was a shaft of sunshine which reflected blindingly on the snow. For days he had been depressed by the weather and the gaudy festivities of the season, but as the cloud lifted he felt suddenly more optimistic.

Hunter, sitting hunched beside him, remained gloomy. It was the Saturday before Christmas and he had better things to do. He always left his shopping until the last minute—he enjoyed being part of the crowd in Newcastle. Christmas meant getting pissed in the heaving pubs on the Big Market, sharing drinks with tipsy secretaries who seemed to spend the last week of work in a continuous office party. It meant wandering up Northumberland Street where children queued to peer in at the magic of Fenwick's window and listening to the Sally Army band playing carols at the entrance to Eldon Square. It had nothing to do with all this space and the bloody cold. Like a Roman stationed on Hadrian's Wall, Hunter thought the wilderness was barbaric.

Ramsay said nothing. The road had been cleared of snow but was slippery, and driving took concentration. Hunter was itching to get

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at the wheel—he had been invited to a party in a club in Blyth and it took him as long as a teenage girl to get ready for a special evening out.

Ramsay turned carefully off the road, across a cattle grid, and onto a track.

"Bloody hell!" Hunter said. "Are we going to get up there?"

"The farmer said it was passable. He's been down with a tractor."

"I'd better get the map," Hunter said miserably. "I suppose we've got a grid reference. I don't fancy getting lost out here."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Ramsay said. "I've been to the house before."

Hunter did not ask about Ramsay's previous visit to Blackstoneburn. The inspector rarely volunteered information about his social life or friends. And apart from an occasional salacious curiosity about Ramsay's troubled marriage and divorce, Hunter did not care. Nothing about the inspector would have surprised him.

The track no longer climbed but crossed a high and empty moor. The horizon was broken by a dry stone wall and a derelict barn, but otherwise there was no sign of habitation. Hunter felt increasingly uneasy. Six geese flew from a small reservoir to circle overhead and settle back once the car had passed.

"Greylags," Ramsay said. "Wouldn't you say?"

"I don't bloody know." Hunter had not been able to identify them even as geese. And I don't bloody care, he thought.

The sun was low in the sky ahead of them. Soon it would be dark. They must have driven over an imperceptible ridge because suddenly, caught in the orange sunlight, there was a house, grey, small-windowed, a fortress of a place surrounded by byres and outbuildings.

"That's it, is it?" Hunter said, relieved. It hadn't, after all, taken so long. The party wouldn't warm up until the pubs shut. He would make it in time.

"No," Ramsay said. "That's the farm. It's another couple of miles yet."

He was surprised by the pleasure he took in Hunter's discomfort, and a little ashamed. He thought his relationship with his sergeant was improving. Yet it wouldn't do Hunter any harm, he thought, to feel anxious and out of place. On his home ground he was intolerably confident.

The track dipped to a ford. The path through the water was rocky and the burn was frozen at the edges. Ramsay accelerated carefully

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up the bank and as the back wheels spun he remembered his previous visit to Blackstoneburn. It had been high summer, the moor scorched with drought, the burn dried up almost to a trickle. He had thought he would never come to the house again.

As they climbed away from the ford they saw the Black Stone, surrounded by open moor. It was eight feet high, truly black with the setting sun behind it, throwing a shadow onto the snow.

Hunter stared and whistled under his breath but said nothing. He would not give his boss the satisfaction of asking for information. The information came anyway. Hunter thought Ramsay could have been one of those guides in bobble hats and walking boots who worked at weekends for the National Park.

"It's a part of a circle of prehistoric stones," the inspector said. "Even if there weren't any snow you wouldn't see the others at this distance. The bracken's grown over them." He seemed lost for a moment in memory. "The house was named after the stone, of course. There's been a dwelling on this site since the fourteenth century."

"A bloody daft place to put a house," Hunter muttered. "If you ask me. . . . "

They looked down into a valley onto an L-shaped house built around a flagged yard, surrounded by windblown trees and shrubs.

"According to the farmer," Ramsay said, "the dead woman wasn't one of the owner's family. . . . "

"So what the hell was she doing here?" Hunter demanded. The emptiness made him belligerent. "It's not the sort of place you'd stumble on by chance."

"It's a holiday cottage," Ramsay said. "Of sorts. Owned by a family from Otterbridge called Shaftoe. They don't let it out commercially but friends know that they can stay here. . . . The strange thing is that the farmer said there was no car. . . . "

The track continued up the hill and had, Hunter supposed, some obscure agricultural use. Ramsay turned off it down a potholed drive and stopped in the yard, which because of the way the wind had been blowing was almost clear of snow. A dirty green Land Rover was already parked there, and as they approached a tall, bearded man got out and stood impassively, waiting for them to emerge from the warmth of their car. The sun had disappeared and the air was icy.

"Mr. Helms." The inspector held out his hand. "I'm Ramsay. Northumbria Police."

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"Aye," the man said. "Well, I'd not have expected it to be anyone else."

"Can we go in?" Hunter demanded. "It's freezing out here."

Without a word the farmer led them to the front of the house. The wall was half covered with ivy and already the leaves were beginning to be tinged with frost. The front door led directly into a living room. In a grate the remains of a fire smouldered, but there was little warmth. The three men stood awkwardly just inside the room.

"Where is she?" Hunter asked.

"In the kitchen," the farmer said. "Out the back."

Hunter stamped his feet impatiently, expecting Ramsay to lead the way. He knew the house. But Ramsay stood, looking around him.

"Had Mr. Shaftoe asked you to keep an eye on the place?" he asked. "Or did something attract your attention?"

"There was someone here last night," Helms said. "I saw a light from the back."

"Was there a car?"

"Don't know. Didn't notice."

"By man, you're a lot of help," Hunter muttered. Helms pretended not to hear.

"But you might have noticed," Ramsay persisted, "fresh tyre tracks on the drive."

"Look," Helms said. "Shaftoe lets me use one of his barns. I'm up and down the track every day. If someone had driven down using my tracks how would I know?"

"Were you surprised to see a light?" Ramsay asked.

"Not really," Helms said. "They don't have to tell me when they're coming up."

"Could they have made it up the track from the road?"

"Shaftoe could. He's got one of those posh Japanese four-wheel-drive jobs."

"Is it usual for him to come up in the winter?"

"Aye." Helms was faintly contemptuous. "They have a big do on Christmas Eve. I'd thought maybe they'd come up to air the house for that. No one's been in the place for months."

"You didn't hear a vehicle go back down the track last night?"

"No. But I wouldn't have done. The father-in-law's stopping with us and he's deaf as a post. He had the telly so loud you can't hear a thing."

"What time did you see the light?"

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Helms shrugged. "Seven o'clock maybe. I didn't go out after that."

"But you didn't expect them to be staying?"

"No. Like I said, I expected them to light a fire, check the calor gas, clean up a bit, and then go back."

"So what caught your attention this morning?"

"The gas light was still on," Helms said.

"In the same room?"

Helms nodded. "The kitchen. It was early, still pretty dark outside, and I thought they must have stayed and were getting their breakfasts. It was only later, when the kids got me to bring them over, that I thought it was strange."

"I don't understand," Ramsay said. "Why did your children want to come?"

"Because they're sharp little buggers. It's just before Christmas. They thought Shaftoe would have a present for them. He usually brings them something, Christmas or not."

"So you drove them down in the Land Rover? What time was that?"

"Just before dinner. Twelvish. They'd been out sledging and Chrissie, my wife, said there was more snow on her kitchen floor than out on the fell. I thought I'd earn a few brownie points by getting them out of her hair." He paused and for the first time he smiled. "I thought I'd get a drink for my trouble. Shaftoe always kept a supply of malt whisky in the place, and he was never mean with it."

"Did you park in the yard?"

"Aye. Like I always do."

"That's when you noticed the light was still on?"

Helms nodded.

"What did you do then?"

"Walked round here to the front."

"Had it been snowing?" Ramsay asked.

"There were a couple of inches in the night but it was clear by dawn."

"What about footprints on the path? You would have noticed if the snow had been disturbed."

"Aye," Helms said. "I might have done if I'd got the chance. But I let the dog and the bairns out of the Land Rover first and they chased round to the front before me."

"But your children might have noticed," Ramsay insisted.

"Aye," Helms said without much hope. "They might."

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"Did they go into the house before you?"

"No. They were still on the front lawn throwing snowballs about when I joined them. That's when I saw the door was open and I started to think something was up. I told the kids to wait outside and came in on my own. I stood in here feeling a bit daft and shouted out the back to Shaftoe. When there was no reply I went on through."

"What state was the fire in?" Ramsay asked.

"Not much different from what it's like now. If you bank it up it stays like that for hours."

There was a pause. "Come on then," Ramsay said. "We'd best go through and look at her."

The kitchen was lit by two gas lamps mounted on one wall. The room was small and functional. There was a small window covered on the outside by bacterial-shaped whirls of ice, a stainless-steel sink, and a row of units. The woman, lying with one cheek against the red tiles, took up most of the available floor space. Ramsay, looking down, recognised her immediately.

"Joyce," he said. "Rebecca Joyce." He looked at Helms. "She was a friend of the Shaftoe family. You don't recognise her?"

The farmer shook his head.

Ramsay had met Rebecca Joyce at Blackstoneburn. Diana had invited him to the house when their marriage was in its final throes and he had gone out of desperation, thinking that on her own ground, surrounded by her family and friends, she might be calmer. Diana was related to the Shaftoes by marriage. Her younger sister Isobel had married one of the Shaftoe sons and at that summer house party they were all there: old man Shaftoe, who had made his money out of scrap, Isobel, and her husband Stuart, a grey, thin-lipped man who had brought the family respectability by proposing to the daughter of one of the most established landowners in Northumberland.

Rebecca had been invited as a friend, solely, it seemed, to provide entertainment. She had been at school with Diana and Isobel and had been outrageous, apparently, even then. Looking down at the body on the cold kitchen floor, Ramsay thought that despite the battered skull he still saw a trace of the old spirit.

"I'll be off then. . . ." Helms interrupted his daydream. "If there's nothing else."

"No," Ramsay said. "I'll know where to find you."

"Aye. Well." He sloped off, relieved. They heard the Land Rover drive away up the track and then it was very quiet.

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"The murder weapon was a poker," Hunter said. "Hardly original."

"Effective though." It still lay on the kitchen floor, the ornate brass knob covered with blood.

"What now?" Hunter demanded. Time was moving on. It was already six o'clock. In another hour his friends would be gathering in the pubs of Otterbridge preparing for the party.

"Nothing," Ramsay said, "until the pathologist and the scene-of-crime team arrive." He knew that Hunter wanted to be away. He could have sent him off in the car, arranged a lift for himself with the colleagues who would arrive later, earned for a while some gratitude and peace, but a perverseness kept him quiet and they sat in the freezing living room, waiting.

When Ramsay met Rebecca Joyce it had been hot, astoundingly hot for the Northumberland hills, and they had taken their drinks outside onto the lawn. Someone had slung a hammock between two Scotch pines and Diana had lain there moodily, not speaking, refusing to acknowledge his presence. They had argued in the car on the way to Blackstoneburn and he was forced to introduce himself to Tom Shaftoe, a small, squat man with silver sideburns. Priggish Isobel and anonymous Stuart he had met before. The row had been his fault. Diana had not come home the night before, and he had asked quietly, restraining his jealousy, where she had been. She had lashed out in a fury, condemning him for his Methodist morals, his dullness.

"You're just like your mother," she had said. The final insult. "All hypocrisy and thrift."

Then she had fallen stubbornly and guiltily silent and had said nothing more to him all evening.

Was it because of her taunts that he had gone with Rebecca to look at the Black Stone? Rebecca wore a red Lycra tube which left her shoulders bare and scarcely covered her buttocks. She had glossy red lipstick and black curls pinned back with combs. She had been flirting shamelessly with Stuart all evening and then suddenly to Ramsay she said:

"Have you ever seen the stone circle?"

He shook his head, surprised, confused by her sudden interest.

"Come on then," she had said. "I'll show you."

In the freezing room at Blackstoneburn, Hunter looked at his boss and thought he was a mean bastard, a kill-joy. There was no need for them both to be there. He nodded towards the kitchen door,

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bored by the silence, irritated because Ramsay would not share information about the dead woman.

"What did she do then?" he asked. "For a living."

Ramsay took a long time to reply and Hunter wondered if he was ill, if he was losing his grip completely.

"She would say," the inspector answered at last, "that she lived off her wits."

He had assumed that because she had been to school with Diana and Isobel her family were wealthy, but discovered later that her father had been a hopeless and irresponsible businessman. A wild scheme to develop a Roman theme park on some land close to Hadrian's Wall had led to bankruptcy, and Rebecca had left school early because the fees could not be paid. It was said that the teachers were glad of an excuse to be rid of her.

"By man," said Hunter, "what does that mean?"

"She had a few jobs," Ramsay said. "She managed a small hotel for a while, ran the office of the agricultural supply place in Otterbridge. But she couldn't stick any of them. I suppose it means she lived off men."

"She was a whore?"

"I suppose," Ramsay said, "it was something like that."

"You seem to know a lot about her. Did you know her well, like?"

The insolence was intended. Ramsay ignored it.

"No," he said. "I only met her once."

But I was interested, he thought, interested enough to find out more about her, attracted not so much by the body in the red Lycra dress, but by her kindness. It was the show, the decadent image, which put me off. If I had been braver I would have ignored it.

Her attempt to seduce him on that hot summer night had been a kindness, an offer of comfort. Away from the house she had taken his hand and they had crossed the burn by stepping stones, like children. She had shown him the round black stones hidden by bracken and then put his hand on her round, Lycra-covered breast.

He had hesitated, held back by his Methodist morals and the thought of sad Diana lying in the hammock on the lawn. Rebecca had been kind again, unoffended.

"Don't worry," she said, laughing, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "Not now. If you need me you'll be able to find out where I am."

And she had run away back to the others, leaving him to follow slowly, giving him time to compose himself.

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Ramsay was so engrossed in the memory of his encounter with Rebecca Joyce that he did not hear the vehicles outside or the sound of voices. He was jolted back to the present by Hunter shouting: "There they are. About bloody time, too." And by the scene-of-crime team at the door bending to change their shoes, complaining cheerfully about the cold.

"Right then," Hunter said. "We can leave it to the reinforcements." He looked at his watch. Seven o'clock. The timing would be tight but not impossible. "I suppose someone should see the Shaftoes tonight," he said. "They're the most likely suspects. I'd volunteer for the overtime myself but I'm all tied up this evening."

"I'll talk to the Shaftoes," Ramsay said. It was the least he could do.

Outside in the dark it was colder than ever. Ramsay's car would not start immediately and Hunter swore under his breath. At last it pulled away slowly, the heater began to work, and Hunter began to relax.

"I want to call at the farm," Ramsay said. "Just to clear up a few things."

"Bloody hell!" Hunter said, convinced that Ramsay was prolonging the journey just to spite him. "What's the matter now?"

"This is a murder enquiry," Ramsay said sharply. "Not just an interruption to your social life."

"You'll not get anything from that Helms," Hunter said. "What could he know, living up here? It's enough to drive anyone crazy."

Ramsay said nothing. He thought that Helms was unhappy not mad.

"Rebecca always goes for lonely men," Diana had said cruelly on the drive back from Blackstoneburn that summer. "It's the only way she can justify screwing around."

"What's your justification?" he could have said, but Diana was unhappy too, and there had seemed little point.

They parked in the farm yard. In a shed cattle moved and made gentle noises. A small woman with fine pale hair tied back in an untidy ponytail let them into the kitchen where Helms was sitting in a high-backed chair, his stockinged feet stretched ahead of him. He was not surprised to see them. The room was warm despite the flagstone floor. A clothes horse, held together with binder twine, was propped in front of the range and children's jeans and jerseys steamed gently. The uncurtained window was misted with condensation. Against one wall was a large square table covered by a

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patterned oilcloth, with a pile of drawing books and a scattering of felt-tipped pens. From another room came the sound of a television and the occasional shriek of a small child.

Chrissie Helms sat by the table. She had big hands, red and chapped, which she clasped around her knees.

"I need to know," Ramsay said gently, "exactly what happened."

Hunter looked at the fat clock ticking on the mantelpiece and thought his boss was mad. Ramsay turned to the farmer.

"You were lying," he said. "It's so far-fetched, you see. Contrived. A strange and beautiful woman found miles from anywhere in the snow. Like a film. It must be simpler than that. You would have seen tracks when you took the tractor up to the road to clear a path for us. It's lonely out here. If you'd seen a light in Blackstoneburn last night you'd have gone in. Glad of the company and old Shaftoe's whisky."

Helms shook his head helplessly.

"Did he pay you to keep quiet?" Hunter demanded. Suddenly, with a reluctant witness to bully he was in his element. "Or did he threaten you?"

"No," Helms said, "it were nothing like that."

"But she was there with some man?" Hunter was jubilant.

"Oh," Helms's wife said quietly, shocking them with her interruption, "she was there with some man."

Ramsay turned to the farmer. "She was your mistress?" he said, and Hunter realised he had known all along.

Helms said nothing.

"You must have met her at the agricultural suppliers in Otterbridge. Perhaps when you went to pay your bill. Perhaps she recognised you. She often came to Blackstoneburn."

"I recognised her," Helms said.

"You'd hardly miss her," the woman said. "The way she flaunted herself."

"No." The farmer shook his head. "No, it wasn't like that."

He paused.

"You felt sorry for her . . . ?" Ramsay prompted.

"Aye!" Helms looked up, relieved to be understood at last.

"Why did you bring her here?" Ramsay asked.

"I didn't. Not here."

"But to Blackstoneburn. You had a key? Or Rebecca did?"

Helms nodded. "She was lonely," he said. "In town. Everyone thinking of Christmas. You know."

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"So you brought her up to Blackstoneburn," Hunter said unpleasantly. "For a dirty weekend. Thinking you'd sneak over to spend some time with her. Thinking your wife wouldn't notice."

Helms said nothing.

"What went wrong?" Hunter demanded. "Did she get greedy? Want more money? Blackmail? Is that why you killed her?"

"You fool!" It was almost a scream, and as she spoke the woman stood up with her huge red hands laid flat on the table. "He wouldn't have harmed her. He didn't kill her. I did."

"You must tell me," Ramsay said again, "exactly what happened."

But she needed no prompting. She was desperate for their understanding. "You don't know what it's like here," she said. "Especially in the winter. Dark all day. Every year it drives me mad. . . . " She stopped, realising she was making little sense, and continued more rationally. "I knew he had a woman, guessed. Then I saw them in town and I recognised her too. She was wearing black stockings and high heels, a dress that cost a fortune. How could I compete with that?" She looked down at her shapeless jersey and jumble-sale trousers. "I thought he'd grow out of it, that if I ignored it, he'd stop. I never thought he'd bring her here." She paused.

"How did you find out?" Ramsay asked.

"Yesterday afternoon I went out for a walk. I left the boys with my dad. I'd been in the house all day and just needed to get away from them all. It was half-past three, starting to get dark. I saw the light in Blackstoneburn and Joe's Land Rover parked outside. Like you said, we're desperate here for company, so I went round to the front and knocked at the door. I thought Tom Shaftoe was giving him a drink."

"There was no car," Ramsay said.

"No," she said. "But Tom parks it sometimes in one of the sheds. I didn't suspect a thing."

"Did you go in?"

"Not then," she said calmly. "When there was no reply I looked through the window. They were lying together in front of the fire. Then I went in. . . ." She paused again. "When she saw me she got up and straightened her clothes. She laughed. I suppose she was embarrassed. She said it was an awkward situation and why didn't we all discuss it over a cup of tea. Then she turned her back on me and walked through to the kitchen." Chrissie Helms caught her breath in a sob. "She shouldn't have turned her back," she said. "I deserved more than that. . . . "

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"So you hit her," Ramsay said.

"I lost control," Chrissie said. "I picked up the poker from the grate and I hit her."

"Did you mean to kill her?"

"I wasn't thinking clearly enough to mean something."

"But you didn't stop to help her?"

"No," she said. "I came home. I left it to Joe to sort out. He owed me that. He did his best, but I knew we'd not be able to carry it through." She looked at her husband. "I'll miss you and the boys," she said. "But I'll not miss this place. Prison'll not be much different from this."

Hunter walked to the window to wait for the police Land Rover. He rubbed a space in the condensation and saw that it was snowing again, heavily. He thought that he agreed with her. ●

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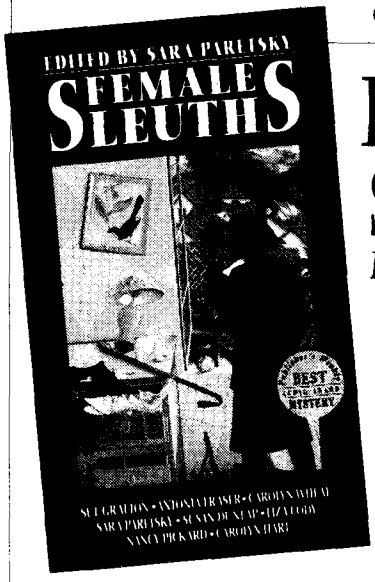
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1994 EQMM READERS AWARD

Fan mail trickles into our offices throughout the year and seems always to strike a note of cheer with the author to whom it is forwarded. Letter writing, however, is one of those good things nearly lost by the wayside: the telephone is easier; people write when they have a complaint or a billing problem. That's why we urge you to take advantage of this year's readers award ballot. To express your appreciation for a favorite story all you have to do is fill in the blanks on the flip side of this page, tear the page out, and send it to us.

Writing can be a lonely occupation, and those who work with the short story are the most isolated writers of all, for unlike novelists they rarely have the satisfaction of being reviewed and cannot see their readership reflected in individual sales. Editors can quote circulation figures, but there's nothing like the voice of a reader to give authors a sense of connection to the people for whom their work is done. *EQMM*'s first Readers Award was presented in 1985. We've had many surprises in the past nine years of the voting. As we enter this watermark tenth year, we hope you'll challenge our instincts once again by pointing out what you think was best in the year just completed.

No special award will be given for reprints this year, and reprints are not eligible for the 1994 Readers Award. You can determine whether a story is a reprint by looking at the copyright line on the story's title page. If the copyright indicates that the story was published in the United States prior to its appearance in *EQMM* in 1994, then the story is not eligible for the 1994 Readers Award. All other stories are eligible.

Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner. *(See back of this page for ballot.)*

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You may want to refresh your memory of this year's selections by referring to the index on pages 152-155 before marking your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 1994 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1995 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-size stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot, if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1994 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail to: The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Dell Magazines
1540 Broadway
New York, NY 10036

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Jan Burke's first novel, Goodnight, Irene, *was published by Simon and Schuster in 1993 and had subsidiary sales in both Europe and Japan. Already at work on her fourth book, Ms. Burke has also managed over the past two years to produce short stories for* AHMM *and a Dutch short-story anthology entitled* Spannend Gebundeld. *This is her first piece for us . . .*

UNHARMED

by JAN BURKE

Pacing my small cell, trying not to listen to the racket around me.

They've just brought a meal to me, and I'm going to settle down to enjoy it. In the two days since Cindy's death, I haven't been able to get enough to eat. The authorities don't know what to make of my appetite.

They've been by to see me a couple of times now; can't make up their minds. I've watched them eyeing me, trying to figure out what went wrong, why I didn't save her. Wondering if I killed her, or if it was an accident. They aren't convinced of my innocence, but they're equally unsure of my guilt.

I'll tell you what I couldn't begin to try to explain to them. Decide for yourself.

The last time I lost my appetite, I was with Cindy. We were together that evening, as we were every evening. . .

She set the meal before me with a small flourish. I stared at it, only half-listening to her prattle mindlessly as she fumbled around in the kitchen, dishing up her own dinner. She insisted on this, this "eating in" every evening. And believe me, she was no gourmet cook. I could barely force myself to eat the unappetizing lumps in gravy that were supposed to resemble beef stew. Not that I know the first thing about cooking, but I wouldn't have minded going out once in a while, nabbing a bite on my own. Fat chance. Cindy wouldn't let me out of her sight.

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Out of her sight. Poor choice of words, Alex.

Cindy was blind. That sense of duty I felt toward her, that protectiveness that is a part of my nature, welled up in me and made me feel ashamed. As penance, I finished off the last of the tasteless gruel.

Don't let me mislead you. I didn't stay with Cindy out of guilt or pity. I knew she was blind when I met her. I thought, at the time, that I was fully prepared to live with that fact. Being with her gave me a sense of purpose unlike any I had known before. I thought I loved her. I had even thought she loved me.

From the moment we met, though, Cindy had taken over my life. I admit that I allowed her to do so. In the beginning, I had an illusion of power. I was piloting her through the obstacles of life. What I failed to understand at the time was that I was also becoming completely dependent on her, not just for material things, but for companionship and a sense of being needed.

I was shuffled around a lot as a kid; I confess that I wouldn't know my own mother if I met her on the street. Cindy offered stability, a chance to stay in one place. You don't know how much I longed for that as a kid. But even the chance to have a place called home doesn't explain how much I needed her. The praise and affection she lavished on me in the beginning became all-important to me; I would have done anything for her. But these days, she doled out her praise and affection in a miserly fashion.

Some might say I was ungrateful. After all, I was better off than a great many others. I wasn't homeless, begging for a handout. Many in my position, with my background and limited education, would never live so well.

To our friends, we still appeared to be devoted to one another. Few of them realized that my devotion was a chore or knew how hard I had to work at it. Even the ones who knew how demanding Cindy could be still idealized our relationship.

I wondered at that, scratching my head in puzzlement. She heard the sound, of course. "Alex! Will you quit that scratching!" she snapped. I silently sulked off to my favorite chair. I didn't like admitting she was right. Lately I had gotten into the nervous habit of scratching my head, and it annoyed the heck out of her. I'm sure it bothered her as much as her whistling between her teeth bothered me. Our nervous habits had started grating on each other.

Face it, Alex, I thought with a sigh, *everything about her is grating on you.*

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Perhaps you think I was unnecessarily harsh in my evaluation, especially considering her physical challenges. Not so. Through my association with her, I met other blind people, and have found that they are as varied in personality as the sighted. I can honestly say that I would have been happy to be a friend or even more than a friend to a great many of them. Cindy would have driven me crazy even if she'd had 20/20 vision.

But I was stuck with her. My dependency on her for my livelihood was never far from her mind. Or mine. At night, I often dreamed of running away, living on my own. So vivid were these dreams that I would often startle myself awake. "What were you dreaming, Alex?" Cindy would ask sleepily. "You've been running in your sleep."

I've been running away from you I wanted to say, but it was no use. She always fell right back to sleep after asking the question. What did she really care about my dreams?

I heard her whistling to herself as she finished cleaning up the dishes. That damned whistling was the worst of it. I tried in every way I could think of to let her know it annoyed me, but to no avail. She didn't understand me at all.

Sure, the age-old complaint.

By the time she suggested an evening walk, I was more than willing to get some fresh air. I anticipated a stroll through the nearby park; maybe a chance to run into a friendly neighbor. But as I made the turn outside the door of our building, Cindy tugged at me so hard I nearly lost my balance.

"Oh no you don't, Alex. I know what you're up to. Well, we're not going to the park. Not this evening."

Well, okay, I admit it—there was a good-looking gal who often took a run through the park about that time of day, and she and I had exchanged some tender looks of longing. But it never went any further—how could it, with Cindy never more than two feet away from me?

I guess Cindy picked up on even my most momentary lack of attention to her and her needs.

I was soon distracted from all thought of the park. Cindy was, as usual, directing me in rude and abrupt tones. "Left, Alex." "Right, Alex." It was humiliating, being treated more as an errant child than as her partner.

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I suddenly realized that this was what she envisioned every day of our life to be like. She would never trust me completely. She would depend on me, but not as a trustworthy companion. Not someone to really love. Knowing that I wasn't trained for anything that would allow me to live as well as I did with her, she meant to use me shamelessly. She would rely on me to guide her from corner to corner, to keep her from bumping into things, to listen to her, to sleep beside her. But my own needs—to be treated with dignity, to be loved—those were of no consequence to her. She was in control.

"Slow down, Alex!"

All of these commands! I thought angrily. *Couldn't you think of some gentler way to let me know what you want?*

She started whistling again. If it had been real whistling, real honest-to-God whistling, I think I could have lived with it. But there we were, walking toward the intersection, and she was doing it, whistling through her teeth. A tuneless, maddening sucking in and out of breath. I wanted to howl from the irritation of it.

It was just at that moment that she insisted on crossing the street. There was a van coming. I saw it, knew she was unaware of it. Knew without a doubt that the young driver was too intent on beating the light to pay attention to anything but the color of the signal.

Cindy tugged at me.

I stopped to scratch.

She lost her balance, losing her grip on me as she stumbled off the curb.

I let her go.

It's going to be hard to find work again. Maybe you can explain to them that I won't fail next time. Tell them, if you would be so kind, one other thing: please don't give me a whistler.

News Item:

BLIND WOMAN KILLED

A young blind woman was killed by a hit-and-run driver yesterday evening at the corner of Madison and Oak. Police report that Cynthia Farnsworth, 24, was struck by a blue van driven by a white male youth.

Farnsworth, who had a guide dog with her, stepped off the curb just as the light was changing. James and Lois Church, who wit-

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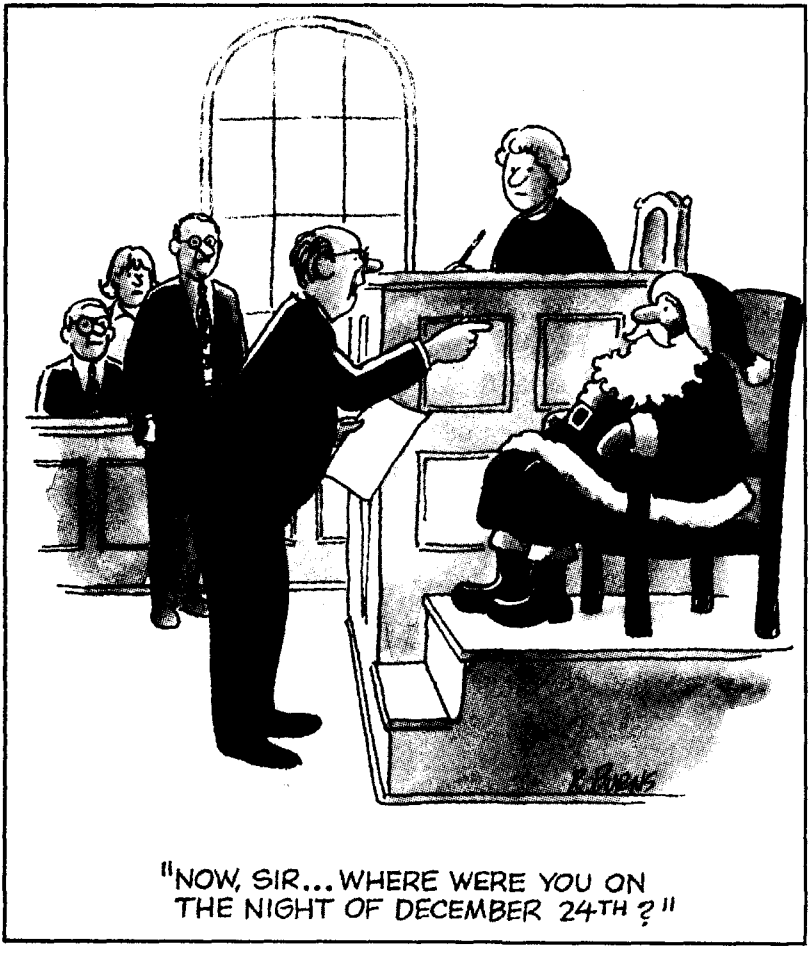
nessed the accident, said the dog refused to cross the street, but did not attempt to prevent Farnsworth from doing so. One other witness, who asked that her name be withheld, claimed Farnsworth was thrown off balance and into the path of the van when the dog stopped to scratch his ear.

Guide dog trainers refused to speculate about the dog's behavior, saying only that the dog's training and fitness will be evaluated.

The dog was unharmed. ●



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The Final Paragraph

THE LAST BATTLEFIELD

by Henry Slesar

There were few casualties still under treatment at the Border Hospital. Three months before, every room, even every corridor, had been crammed with rows of wounded men, their needs exhausting both medical staff and supplies. But the last treaty had held, the last gun was silenced. The war was over, if not the passions that inspired it.

Colonel Lavros was the highest-ranking patient. In the week before the armistice he had been promoted in the field by the late general himself, at least according to Lavros. Some people thought Lavros had no right to his shoulder eagles. Some people thought Lavros was a liar, a weakling, and a coward; that he had led his battalion into an impossible battle and deserted them when he realized its hopelessness. There had been many deaths, and many wounds. Lavros had only a broken arm and some minor internal injuries, sustained by an accident to the armored vehicle he used to flee the battlefield.

On Sunday evening, when Colonel Lavros was found in his hospital room mysteriously bludgeoned to death, there was no one to mourn him. But there was plenty of shocked surprise, since every visitor to the colonel had been forced to submit to a search at Lavros's own request. The colonel was only too aware that he had enemies.

"Maybe we should have noticed it," Dr. Blondin told the inspector, a heavyset man who had seen too much tragedy in his life. "On the day he was killed, Lavros had five visitors. More than he had in all the weeks he's been here."

"And all of them—comrades in arms?"

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"So they claimed. Good old friends from the early days. One of them said he was a nephew. One was a schoolteacher. One was a pharmacist. Two of them were brothers, dealers in scrap iron. The other was an older man with a cane. Yes, we took it away from him. Nobody walked into that room with anything resembling a weapon. It was Lavros's own demand."

"Now you know why," the inspector grunted. "And now you must also realize that it was a conspiracy. Lavros could have been killed by any one of his visitors, and none of them would say a word . . ."

"When we questioned them, they all said he was 'asleep' when they entered the room. Each one is covering up for the murderer. They've committed a perfect crime, Inspector!"

The inspector's eyes went sad, his mouth heavy with regret.

"Maybe some people would like it to remain perfect, considering the kind of man Lavros was. But Justice is a demanding goddess. She asks us to be fair even to the most deserving victims. . . . Are the men in custody?"

"Yes, of course. But I still don't see how you can prove anything."

"Unfortunately, I think I can. I know how we can determine exactly which one of them killed Colonel Lavros."

"Someone did bring a weapon into the colonel's room," the inspector said, "a blunt instrument that simply went unnoticed. As you can see, our gentle schoolteacher was also a casualty of war. He blamed the colonel for his steel artificial leg, and used it as a means of revenge."

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DETECTIVERSE

THE DRUG BUST

A parody based on "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe

by ROGER GALLAGHER

Once upon a midnight dreary,
  while romancing Lorna Leary
On the sofa in her parlor,
  where we'd oft made out before,
I was rudely interrupted
  by her father, crying, "Up, Ted!
That's no way to treat a lady!
  Here's your hat and there's the door!"
Dad's just being Dad, I figured
  as my feet traversed the floor.
Only that and nothing more.

But it seems I was mistaken.
  Daddy and his godforsaken
Daughter had a good thing going,
  south to north and ship to shore.
Daddy found our nightly snuggling
  interfering with their smuggling,
Keeping her from darker duties.
  That's why I was shown the door.
I found out and told her she must
  cease, or we could meet no more.
Quoth my snuggler, "What a bore!"

Now I wish I'd never met her,
  though I doubt I'll soon forget her.
Even as the DEA is
  kicking in their big front door,
I'll be praying they can heal her.
  I lament my role as squealer,
But, let's face it, better that than
  fluid flow of drugs galore.
When she's clean, will she forgive and
  snuggle, as in days of yore?
Something tells me . . . nevermore!

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a *NEW* short story by

DOUG ALLYN

The following story was inspired by an incident that occurred at the 1993 EQMM *Readers Award party, when author Doug Allyn discovered that he has a look-alike in the crime field, 1993 Edgar Allan Poe Award nominee Bruce Holland Rogers. When Mr. Allyn called us to ask if we could hold the presses for this story, we had no idea where that germ of an idea would lead him, but as usual we're surprised and delighted by the outcome . . .*

THE CROSS-WOLF

by DOUG ALLYN

"Are you gay, mom?" Corey asked.

I glanced at him. He was staring out the window at the passing pine trees, sitting stiffly upright in the Ford Escort's passenger seat like a soldier. An eleven-year-old marine. His dark hair was slicked down and parted neatly. His blue school-uniform shirt was buttoned to the throat.

"Yes," I said. "I am. How long have you known?"

His turn to look at me. His little face looked pale. I know it's unfashionable to tan nowadays, but Corey looked wan. And I wondered how well they fed him at school, or if they made sure he ate.

"That's not true, is it?" he said at last. "You're not gay."

"Nope," I said. "Though if I date any more losers I may consider it. Why did you ask?"

"Chad Holobeck's mother is gay. He met her lover last Easter break. He said it was weird."

"And I'm weird, is that it?"

He shrugged. I couldn't read a thing in the gesture, not triumph or even satisfaction. I wondered if I'd lost a point in whatever game we were playing.

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My son had become a changeling; a stranger overnight. I was on my own when he was born. I kept him with me my first few years of college, but when my work made me a nomad among offshore oil platforms, I thought a boarding school was our best option. I hated being apart from him, but I had no choice. Or so I thought.

Recently, when my father died and left me his cafe in northern Michigan, I suddenly saw a chance for a life with my son. And when Corey asked if he could spend his summer vacation touring Europe with a classmate's family I thought it was a godsend. I worked like a madwoman all summer getting the Crow's Nest on a solid footing.

But when I picked Corey up at the Huron Harbor airport last week, everything had changed. He was different. Maybe seeing Paris with his wealthy friends did it. Or maybe aliens beamed him up and left a pod person in his place. One who couldn't quite conceal his disdain for my small hometown and business.

And possibly for me. Though to be fair, if he felt contempt for me, he was too well mannered to show it. Or maybe I was too dense to read it. But the bottom line was, he said he preferred to return to school rather than live with me. If I wouldn't mind. And if I could afford it.

He said it so . . . rationally. And I was so stunned, that I heard myself answering calmly that we could probably manage it. And it was settled. Just like that.

I was sure it would pass, this idea of our living apart. It was jet lag, culture lag, something. If we could just spend some time together, we could work through our differences. So I suggested we spend the last few days of summer rambling around the Upper Peninsula.

Another mistake. The lonely grandeur of Lake of the Clouds and the Porcupine Mountains didn't seem to touch him, and after two days in a car with Corey I was beginning to wonder if school might not actually be the best option. God help me, I was beginning to see his father in him, a man I once idolized and now despised. Corey's my son. I loved him with all my heart. But I wasn't sure I liked him all that much anymore.

"Can we stop someplace?" Corey asked. "I need to use a rest room."

We'd passed a road sign a mile or so back, Anawhey 5 Miles, but when I saw a little roadside curio shop standing well off the road, I pulled in. The sign in front said Indian Artifacts.

Inside, a tall, wizened oldster in faded coveralls was sitting in a bentwood rocker behind the counter, carving a small totem out of

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pine. I asked about rest rooms and he jerked a thumb toward the back.

"Have to take turns, I'm afraid," he said, smiling an apology. "It's only a one-holer."

Corey walked out the back door to the privy. Through the screen I saw him hesitate when he opened the door and I half-expected him to close it again, but he went inside.

I browsed. It was an intriguing little shop, antique bottles, carved wooden animals and toys, tribal shields and mandalas made of raccoon or rabbit fur. Everything seemed to be well crafted, none of the usual tourist crap from Taiwan or wherever. The air was scented, a heady mix of cedar and pine.

The old man was watching me. A small bear caught my eye. It was hardwood, ash I think, beautifully carved and blackened by fire. I turned it over. There was no price tag. "How much is this?" I asked.

He was still staring at me. "I know you," he said at last. It wasn't a question.

"I don't think so," I said. "We're not from the area."

"No, I know that. But I know you. You got people around here?"

"No," I said. Or anywhere else, I thought. "How much is the bear?"

"Eight bucks," he said. He rose easily from his rocker and came around the counter, still eyeing me curiously. And still carrying his knife. He was almost a head taller than I am, and I'm tall for a woman. His hair was steel gray, and looked as if it had been trimmed with garden shears. His eyes were black as obsidian. He smelled of wood smoke and needed a shave. He took the bear from me.

"Never did get the forepaw quite right," he said, looking it over critically. "Make it six bucks. What was your maiden name?"

"Mitchell," I said, humoring him, wishing Corey would hurry the hell up.

"No," he said, frowning, "that's not it. Sorry to seem nosy. My name's Dolph Fereau. This is my place. Everything in here, I carved. From memory, no pictures, no models, nothing. I've got a pretty good eye. And I'm sure I know you from somewhere."

"I don't think so," I said. "I'll take the bear." The room shuddered with a deep bass rumble.

"Boy, you step away from there. Now!" Corey was standing near a pile of furs in the corner of the room. The pile raised its massive head. Corey backed away, his eyes the size of saucers.

"Jeez," he managed. "What is that, a wolf?"

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"Nah," the old man said. "Keeping wolves is illegal. She's a cross."

"A cross?" Corey echoed.

"Cross-wolf. Half wolf, half somethin' else. Her mama was a cross too, so she's mostly wolf. Her pups are still nursin', so she's kinda surly. Not that she needs a reason." He said something in a language I didn't recognize. The cross-wolf sat up. Her coat was gunmetal gray mottled with black, the color of storm clouds. Her head was massive, the size of a basketball. Her eyes were an intense silver-blue and glittered like moonlight on deep water.

"Coool," Corey said, with more animation than I'd heard from him in days. "What's her name?"

"Can't tell you that," the old man said, with a faint smile. "It's in Anishnabe. I never use it unless I want her to do something. In English it would be Bitch from Hell."

Corey looked at him doubtfully, his eyes cataloguing the old man's clothing, grubby boots, calloused hands, the grime under his nails. "My friend at school has Rottweiler guard dogs at home. They're bigger than this one. How do you know she's part wolf?"

"I raised her myself. Her mother too."

"But how could you do that?" Corey said evenly, with smug, irrefutable logic. "You just said it's illegal to keep wolves."

"I don't keep them. To get a cross, you take a bitch in heat and stake her out near a trail wolves use. Sometimes a male scents her on the wind and mates with her. Or maybe the pack finds her and tears her apart and you lose your bitch. It's risky business. Wolves are like people. You're never sure what they're gonna do. That's why cross pups cost so much."

"How much?"

"A grand each for females, eight hundred for males."

"That is a lot," Corey said, frowning. "But if you're not sure who they mate with, how can they have a pedigree?"

"Pedigrees are for bookkeepers," the old man snorted.

"But with no pedigree, you can't prove what they are. They could be anything."

"A pedigree doesn't prove what a dog is, only what its parents were. With a cross-wolf you don't even know that much. So you have to let it be itself." He reached down behind the counter and came up with a pup, a squirming ball of fur with slits for eyes and comically oversized paws. He handed it to Corey. Bitch from Hell watched with intense interest. "What do you think," Fereau asked. "This little guy look like a wolf to you?"

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"He smells pretty bad," Corey said, gingerly holding the pup.

"So did you at that age," Fereau said. "Me too. Maybe your mama will buy him for you." He glanced at me with a wry smile to show he was kidding. I think. The smile turned into curiosity. "Your mother," he said to me. "What was her family name?"

"Hubert," I said.

"Nope," he said, shaking his head with mock exasperation. "Don't know any Huberts either. I must be losin' it."

"Maybe I've got a twin somewhere," I said. "People say everyone has one."

"No," Fereau said positively. "No two things are ever alike. Not snowflakes or people or dogs. Not even dogs with pedigrees. You want me to wrap up the bear?"

"Please," I said.

He carried it to the counter, began rolling it up in a sheet of grubby newspaper, then hesitated. "Bear," he said, with a wry grin of satisfaction. "That's it. Not Hubert. Dubear."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your mother's name, it had a little 'd' in front of it, right? D'Hubert? Up here we pronounce it Dubear."

All the air seemed to go out of the room. I nodded. It was all I could manage. Corey glanced up at me oddly.

"I knew you were familiar," Fereau said, twisting the ends of paper together. "All the D'Hubert girls look a little alike. Eyes like yours, thin jaw. Good-looking women, no offense. Are you one of Corinne's daughters?"

"No," I said slowly. "My mother's name was Madeline."

The old man nodded. "Madeline, Frank's youngest girl. I shoulda guessed right off. Except for bein' a little taller, you're her spittin' image."

"You knew her?" I said, stunned.

"Sure. I think our families are even shirttail relations or something. From Burt Lake."

"But . . . I thought she was an orphan."

"She tell you that? Well, maybe she's got her reasons, or thinks she does. She and ol' Frank had trouble when she ran off. But she ain't hardly no orphan. Tell you what, you see her, you tell her Dolph Fereau says hello. See what she says about that. How's she doin'?"

"She's . . . she's dead," I said. "She died a few days after I was born."

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Fereau blinked. "I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I didn't know."

"But you really did know her," I stammered. "Look, I was raised by my grandmother, my father's mom. She didn't know my mother, never met her at all. I was told she was an orphan. I've never even seen a picture of her!"

"Hey, look, I'm sorry," Fereau said uncomfortably. "Maybe I spoke out of turn. I could be wrong about this. Probably am."

"No. You knew about the 'd' in her name. I'd almost forgotten it myself. Please, what can you tell me about her?"

"Not much," he said reluctantly. "Look, it's been a lotta years—"

"Aaahh!" Corey shouted, dropping the puppy, flailing frantically at his arms. "It's got bugs!" The pup squalled as it hit the floor and the cross-wolf bolted from her corner, eyes ablaze, snarling, her bared fangs only inches from Corey's face.

Fereau shouted at her, grabbed Corey by the scruff of the neck, and threw him in the general direction of the door. "You get outta here, now!" he snapped. "Christ, kid, are you outta your mind, fumblin' her pup like that? You're lucky she didn't take your head off. Ain't you never seen a flea?"

"No," Corey flared, "not on me, anyway!"

"Lady, you'd best go. I'll hold Bitch here, but it ain't safe for you now."

"Wait, please, can we just talk a minute?"

"Dammit, it ain't safe! I can't tell you nothin' and it ain't my place to anyway. Check with the Indian Center in town, maybe they can help you out."

"Indian?" I echoed stupidly.

"Yeah. Jesus, you mean you didn't even know that? Your mother was Anishnabe, Ojibway, or part anyway. Look, you gotta get outta here. If Bitch decides to take a chunk outta me I won't be able to hold her. Now move it!"

I stumbled out of the shop after Corey. He stalked angrily to the car, got in, and slammed the door. I climbed behind the wheel in a daze, trying to make sense of what Fereau had said.

"Come on, let's go!" Corey snapped. He was flushed, and his nostrils were pinched with rage. "Did you see what he did? His john stinks and his dog's got bugs, and he put his dirty hands on me. Let's go find a town with a motel or something. I need a shower. You can catch things from fleas."

"Didn't you hear what he said?" I said, swallowing. "He knew my mother." I started the car.

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"He was just trying to con you into buying more tourist junk. French people did it to us all the time."

"No," I said numbly. "He knew her. My God, he probably knows more about her than I do."

"Yeah, well he claimed to be related to her, too. Is that what you want? Relatives like him? Jeez, Mom, look at this dump. He's just trash."

I swiveled in the seat to face him. Except for a few spats on the behind when he was a toddler to keep him out of trouble, I've never laid a hand on my son. Never had to. But at that moment I was only a word away from slapping him silly.

He must have read it in my eyes, because he went suddenly silent and edged away. I shifted the car into drive, and eased it down the long, narrow driveway out to the blacktop.

"D'Hubert?" the woman said. "Doesn't ring a bell. Could I see your card, please?"

"My card?"

"Your tribal ID."

"I don't have one," I said. "I'm not from here."

She didn't look particularly "Indian" to me. I'd been half-expecting someone in tribal dress. She was wearing a beige skirt, white blouse. Her face was squarish and large-boned, but her hair, worn short, was much lighter than mine. The Indian Center appeared to be an ordinary office, a large, open bay, partitioned into cubicles. Only the wall mural, a village scene of tribal life, indicated it was anything but an insurance agency.

"Do you mind if I ask why you want to find the d'Hubert family?" she asked.

"I—recently learned I may be related to them," I said. "I'd just like to talk to someone."

"I see," she nodded, tapping her front teeth with a yellow lead pencil while she thought. "Well, technically we aren't supposed to give out that information. But maybe it isn't necessary. If you're moving to the area, I can enroll you for medical care if you sign a declaration that you're at least one sixty-fourth Native American."

"A sixty-fourth?" Corey echoed curiously. "How could anybody know that?"

"Basically, you just have to say so," the woman said drily. "We'll take your word for it. The tribal council has to approve it, but they're fairly flexible. The declaration also qualifies you to work in a tribal

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casino or other industry. To share in any financial disbursement, though, you'd have to apply for—"

"Miss, I'm not interested in applying for benefits, I'm just trying to locate a relative."

"Sorry," she said. "No offense, but for a long time people didn't want to admit they were Ojibway. Now that we have the casinos, people are coming out of the woodwork claiming Pontiac was their great-uncle. Unfortunately, he was Odawa. What's the name of the family you're looking for?"

"D'Hubert," I said, and spelled it for her. "I was told they were from . . . Burt Lake?"

"Lots of folks are from Burt Lake," she said curtly, moving behind a computer monitor at the end of the counter. "They're scattered from here to Canada now. Those that survived." She typed out the name on her keyboard.

"I don't understand," I said. "What was Burt Lake?"

"Burt Lake? It was an Anishnabe town south of Cheboygan, quite prosperous at the time. The local *chemokman* sheriff showed up with a posse, turned the families out of their homes, and burned the whole place to the ground. No notice, no hearings, no more town. The families lost everything. Some of them moved up here. Some starved that winter. It was an ugly business. There are still plenty of families around whose parents were burned out. But I'll bet a dollar to a donut that good-looking boy of yours never reads about Burt Lake in his Michigan history books."

"I don't go to school here," Corey said.

She shrugged. "Wouldn't matter if you did. D'Hubert. There are three families registered. Do you know which one?"

"Frank?" I said.

"Francis and Angeline d'Hubert, probably. Daughters Corinne and Madeline? The family was enrolled in '37, and they have a local address. . . . " She frowned.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Probably not. I just don't see any recent activity under this name, voting or anything. It's possible they moved away without notifying us. The address is still current, though. Do you want it?"

The house had been handsome once, a turn-of-the-century two-story clapboard with a full-width front porch. The paint was flaking and shingles were cracked. A patch of green moss was creeping up one corner of the building. The driveway was unpaved, but the garage

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was in use. The door was open and tools were scattered about on the dirt floor. No one seemed to be around.

I stepped up on the porch with Corey trailing reluctantly behind and rang the buzzer. I heard it chime. No answer. I could hear sounds from within, though. Canned laughter from a television set. I tried again.

"There's somebody inside," Corey said, peering through the front window. "A lady watching TV."

"Get away from there," I said. I rapped hard on the front-door glass. Through the drapes I saw a shadowy figure of a woman move to the door—and stand there. She made no move to open it. "Hello?" I said, rapping again.

She opened the door. She was sixtyish, short and stout. Her hair was tinted reddish pink. She was wearing a teal-blue polyester bathrobe and slippers. And she looked nothing at all like me. "Yes?"

"Are you Mrs. d'Hubert? Angeline d'Hubert?"

"No, Angeline was Frank's first wife. She died . . . I don't know, back in the fifties, I guess. A long time ago. I'm Emma d'Hubert. What is it you want?"

"My name's Michelle Mitchell. This is my son Corey. I think we might be related to you. Can we talk a minute?"

"What do you mean, related?" she said warily. "I don't know you."

"My mother's name was Madeline d'Hubert. Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Madeline?" she said, blinking, peering at me more closely. "You're saying you're Maddy's daughter? Maddy didn't have any kids."

"She did, actually. Me. Did you know her at all?"

She nodded grudgingly. "Yeah. Sure I knew her. Look, what's this about?"

"I'm not sure myself," I said. "I only recently learned that . . . well, that my mother had any relatives. I'd really like to talk to someone about it. Is Mr. d'Hubert at home?"

"No, Frank's up north. I don't know when he'll be back. Maybe a couple weeks, maybe longer."

"I see. Well, anything you could tell me, I'd really appreciate. Could we just talk a few minutes?"

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "I'm not supposed to let strangers in, you know? Boone, my nephew, he gets awful hot about it."

"Please," I said. "It would mean a lot to me."

"Well," she grumbled, "I guess a few minutes won't hurt."

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I followed her into the living room. The wallpaper pattern had been flowered once. The carpet was threadbare. A dime-store print of a forest in autumn hung above the sagging couch. The air was hazy with cigarette smoke, and the whole place needed serious vacuuming. Mrs. d'Hubert switched the TV to mute, settled into the rocker facing it, and lit another cigarette. There was a mixed drink on the tray beside her chair. Southern Comfort, unless I missed my guess. The coffee-table ashtray was overflowing.

I sat on the edge of the couch across from her. Corey stood by the door like a sentry, unwilling to advance another step into the room.

"I can see it now." She nodded, eyeing me over the rim of her glass. "You favor her some. I heard she died, of course, long since, but I didn't know about . . . well, you. What happened to Maddy?"

"She died in childbirth. I never knew her at all."

"You said your name was Mitchell, right? The only Mitchell I knew about was . . . He had an odd name. Irish, I think."

"Shannon," I prompted.

"Yeah, that's it. Shannon Mitchell. Kind of a wild character, as I recall."

I nodded. "That's my dad. Or it was. He was killed in an auto accident a year or so ago. The thing is, he wouldn't talk about my mother. Ever. I only learned she had relatives here by chance."

"Frank and your father didn't get on," she said. "Frank's folks were burned out by whites and he never had much use for 'em. Look, what is it you want from me?"

"Anything you can tell me at all. About my mother, or . . . anything, I suppose. What was she like?"

"She was a handful," she said sourly. "She was a teenager when Frank and I got married. Frank's older daughter, Corinne, married a flyboy from the airbase at Sawyer and it damn near killed him. Never spoke to her again. Things were different then. There was a lot of pressure to keep the people together. So many folks were driftin' off tryin' to find work, for a while it looked like the Ojibway people might just . . . disappear, you know? Like Burt Lake. Frank felt real strong about it. So after Corinne left, he tried to keep Madeline on a tight leash. Didn't work, though."

"What happened?"

"Your father hired Frank as a guide one winter. Some kind of mining job over by Iron Mountain. Mitchell, he was fresh outta Viet Nam then, and I think he was more'n a little crazy. Must've been to hire Frank knowin' how he was about whites. I don't know how

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Maddy and your dad got together. She used to drive supplies back to the site sometimes. But when the job was finished, she left with him. And, well . . ." Her voice faded, and she frowned as she sipped her drink.

"And what?" I prompted. She glanced at me, and I read something unpleasant in her eyes. Satisfaction? Something.

"She came back that fall, knocked up. Wanted to stay a few days till she could find a place of her own. She and Frank had a helluva row. He was drinking then, got mean when he drank. He slapped her around some, ran her off. I snuck out after, gave her money for bus fare. She was in rough shape."

"What do you mean, rough?" I asked.

"He gave her a black eye, and she was . . . bleeding a little. You know, from down here," she said, gesturing at her lap. "She said Mitchell didn't know she was pregnant. She'd kept it from him, didn't want to push him into anything. I told her she'd best tell him, 'cause no way Frank would take her back. I guess she must've."

"They were married in the hospital," I said numbly. "That's all my dad would ever say about it. He told me she was an orphan."

"Maybe she was, as far as he was concerned. Might as well have been. So if you've come here expectin' to get anything from Frank, you'd best forget it. He won't want to see you."

"Perhaps that's just as well," I said, rising stiffly from the sofa, a century older than when I came. "I don't think I care to see him either. Do you have any idea where Corinne is now?"

"No, she wrote a few times, but Frank, he just threw her letters out. She could be on the moon for all I know."

"I see. Well, thanks very much for seeing me. There is one favor I'd like to ask, though."

"Like what?"

"Would you have any old photographs of my mother? A snapshot, anything? I've never seen a picture of her."

"Pictures? No, I don't think so. Look, you'd better go. My nephew'll hit the roof if he finds out I let anybody in."

"I don't understand."

"No reason you should, it's none of your business. Look, there's only one place any pictures might be, and I can't reach it. I'll have Boone check it later. If there's anything there I'll send it along."

"I'll be glad to get it for you," I offered. "It'll save you the trouble of mailing it. Or I can come back tomorrow if you like."

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"I guess we can look now," she grumbled. "No need for you to come back. It's in Frank's room."

I followed her down a narrow hallway toward the rear of the house. I glanced through an open bedroom door as we passed. It looked like a tornado had hit the room, unmade bed, girlie magazines and fast-food wrappers scattered around.

"Boone's," she said, pointedly closing the door. "Him and his buddy live like pigs and their manners aren't much better. I never shoulda taken him in. This is Frank's room here," she said, opening the last door off the hallway.

I stepped in. It was spartan, an old-fashioned wrought-iron bedstead with a flannel coverlet. A crucifix hung on the wall next to a gun rack with a few weapons. There was a fireplace against one wall with a pair of framed photographs on its mantel. Two of them were of the same person, a young man in a dated army uniform, WWII vintage I guessed. In the other shot he was older, standing with two other men in hunting clothes beside a Chevy pickup truck. Francis d'Hubert. My grandfather.

I knew him without being told. Perhaps Fereau was right, there was a family resemblance. Or perhaps we simply know our blood kin by some atavistic sixth sense, the way wolves know members of their clan. There was something eerily familiar about the look of him. I decided it was his eyes, a bit wider apart than normal, with a flat, impassive gaze. Very much like Corey's. I wondered how deep the resemblance ran.

"The box is on the top closet shelf there," Emma said, sitting on the edge of the bed, sipping her drink. "Don't mind the dust, I don't get around so good anymore."

I retrieved the cardboard box she pointed out, carried it to the bed, and opened it. Nothing. Some out-of-date insurance papers, a title to a truck, 1964. I swallowed my disappointment without much trouble. I was getting used to it.

"Is this all there is?" I asked.

"Afraid so," she said. "Frank went on a tear after Maddy left, threw everything of hers away, pictures, everything. If he missed anything it'd be in that box."

Corey had followed us into the room and wandered over to the gun rack. He reached up and touched one. "Let those be," I said, picking up the box.

"You can leave it," Mrs. d'Hubert said. "It's just a bunch of old junk anyway . . ." Her voice was drowned by the thrum of a motorcycle rumbling up the driveway to the garage.

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"Oh Jesus, now we're in for it," she said. "You'd best get out of here."

"No problem," I said. "Come on, Corey."

We didn't make it. When I stepped out, the hallway was blocked by a hulk in a grubby denim jacket, shoulder-length hair the color of moldy hay, and Schwarzenegger mirrored shades. "What the hell's goin' on here?" he snarled. "Who are you?"

"A distant relative who's just leaving," I said. "Wonderful to meet you."

"You stay right where you are, lady, until I get some straight answers. What's going on here, Emma?"

"She's one of Frank's granddaughters, Boone," Mrs. d'Hubert quavered. "It's nothing to do with you."

"No? She show you any ID?"

"No, but I *know* her, Boone. I knew her mother."

"Yeah, well I don't know her, or her mother either. Come on, lady, cough up some ID."

"What are you talking about? Look, I don't know what your problem is, sport. I came to look up my grandfather; it didn't work out, I'm outta here. Now if that's not good enough for you, there's a phone in the living room, why don't you call the police, have them straighten it out?"

"Boone, it's okay, really," Mrs. d'Hubert said, pushing past me. "They're going, they won't be back."

Anger and something else were battling in his eyes. Fear? "Well?" I said.

"Fine. Get out," he said. "But I catch you sniffin' around here again, you're gonna be in a world of trouble."

I almost lost it. Anger and disappointment I'd been holding in check all day, first with Corey, then with Frank, nearly exploded. I found myself unconsciously casting about for some sort of weapon, a baseball bat, a golf club, some way to forcibly move this Neanderthal out of my way when Corey firmly took my wrist and simply led me past him. Boone stepped grudgingly aside, then started in on Emma about letting strangers in. We could hear them shouting all the way to the car.

"What the heck was the matter with that guy?" Corey asked as he buckled his safety belt.

"He's just a jerk," I said. My hand was trembling so fiercely I could barely fit the key in the ignition.

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"He was also really big," Corey said, looking at me oddly. "I was afraid you were gonna do something crazy. You scare me sometimes, you know that?"

"I'm your mother," I said. "It's my job."

"But why were you so angry? I mean, so he was a jerk. When I got in that fight with Bobby Yeager, you said if I punched out every jerk I met, my hands would swell up like catcher's mitts and I'd never play Nintendo again."

"Did I say that? Well, I was right. And please note that I didn't punch him out or whatever."

"But why were you so angry?"

I slowed the car, checking both ways before I turned onto Anawhey's main drag. I used the interval to think. How much truth do you tell a child? I've tried not to lie to my son, but I don't always tell him the whole truth. About his father, for example. I'd told him our relationship didn't work out. Which was the truth. And as much as he needed to know, for now. But Corey was growing and changing too fast for me. I wasn't sure how much longer I could shield him from unpleasant truths. Or even if I should.

"I don't know much about my mother," I said, keeping my tone neutral. "I do know I was born prematurely, about a month. And that my mother died a few days later."

"But I don't . . . Oh," he said. "That lady said Frank and your mother . . . had a fight."

"Right," I nodded. "That's what she said."

"God, some family tree," he said after a bit. "Crazy grandfather, crazy mom. I may be the sanest one of the bunch."

"That's a scary thought," I said.

"Yeah," he said, agreeing with me for the first time in days. "So, are we about through with our trip down memory lane?"

"I guess we are," I said, taking a deep breath. "Sorry the old family tree turned out to be a weed."

"You should've known it would. Look at us."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He glanced out the window, avoiding my eyes. "Maybe we're not so bad. Look at Richard the Third. Or Lizzie Borden."

"I can't speak for Richard, but I think I know how Lizzie felt. If I ever meet my grandfather Frank face-to-face and there's an axe nearby, we may both be in a lot of trouble."

"No," Corey said slowly, "I don't think you should meet him. You shouldn't go back there."

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"Why? Because of Boone? Maybe you're right. It's probably more trouble than it's worth."

"No, not just that. I think that lady was lying to you."

"What do you mean? Lying about what?"

"I'm not sure, but she was. I was watching her face when she talked. She was afraid of you. Or afraid of something. And some of the things she said didn't make sense."

"What things?"

"What she told you about your grandfather Frank. She said he'd be back in a couple of weeks?"

"That's right."

"His guns, the ones in the rack? They were rusty."

"Maybe he's a lousy housekeeper. She certainly is."

"No, I don't mean dusty, Mom, they were rusted, bad. And he's a guide or something, right? But nobody who's serious about guns would let them get rusty like that. I don't think they've been touched in a long time. Years maybe."

I stared at him, my ultra-logical son. The changeling. "Since when did you become a firearms expert?"

"We had a gun-safety course at school. And Mr. Whitmore, Ricky's dad, has some. He keeps 'em in a glass case."

"I see. Okay, so maybe the guns are in lousy shape. So what?"

"I don't know, I'm just saying it doesn't make sense. Another thing, she said Frank hates white people because of what happened to his family at that place?"

"Burt Lake?"

"Right. And he—he roughed your mom up and kicked her out because she was . . . pregnant by a white guy, right?"

"Something like that. So?"

"So what about that goon who gave us all the static? He lives there, and he's white."

"Not goon," I said automatically. "His name was Boone."

"I know what his name was," he said, mildly annoyed.

Neither of us spoke for a while. The afternoon shadows were lenghtening into dusk as we drove out of Anawhey on south 95, Witch Lake, twenty-six miles. I was so lost in thought, replaying conversations in my mind, that I scarcely noticed the headlights coming rapidly up behind me. Until they divided. And a Harley Davidson roared up alongside. Boone.

His scruffy mane was streaming in the wind. His eyes were alien behind the mirrored sunglasses. He shouted something at me over

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the thrum of the bike, then jabbed his finger at the shoulder of the road. Pull over.

"Mom," Corey said matter-of-factly, "there's another motorcycle behind us, and we're in the middle of noplace out here."

"I know. Are you buckled up?"

He nodded. "What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know."

Boone had to drop back momentarily as an eighteen-wheeler blasted past on the narrow two-lane blacktop. Then he gunned his cycle alongside us again. And jabbed his finger at the shoulder. When I didn't respond, he reached behind him on the seat and came up with a length of chain with a padlock attached. He dangled it from his wrist a moment, letting the wind blast swing it like a pendulum, then without warning he swung it savagely at the car.

I flinched, instinctively cramming the wheel to the right to avoid the chain. I heard it thump on the roof as my right front wheel hit the shoulder, and then we were skidding and fishtailing as I fought the wheel trying to get the car under control.

Boone was ahead of us now, half-twisted in the saddle, grinning back at me. His partner was somewhere behind us. I wrestled the car back on the road and floored it. The little Ford Escort surged ahead, whining like a vacuum cleaner and with roughly the same horsepower. It was never meant for anything like this. Neither was I.

I straddled the centerline as the car got up to speed again, trying to keep Boone off, but it was hopeless. The biker behind me pulled up on the other side, and swung a chain at our rear window, exploding a hailstorm of glass into the car. I swerved right, forcing him to veer off, but only for a moment.

"Mom!" Corey wailed. "He's coming again!"

And so was Boone. He'd braked momentarily in the other lane to let me by, but now he and the other biker were both coming up fast.

I swerved wildly back and forth over the centerline, trying to keep them behind us, but I knew I couldn't keep it up. The little car felt like it could flip over at any second, and the cycles were too fast and maneuverable. It was like trying to outrun horsemen on foot. In the gathering dusk, the highway and countryside were empty as the back of the moon, no traffic, no houses. No help.

Dammit! I continued to swerve, but narrowed the swing a little, giving Boone's buddy room to come up on my right. He took the opening, gunning up alongside the rear fender, swinging his chain. I jammed the wheel hard right, and touched the brakes. He did the

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same, easily avoiding the car, but he lost his chain as he hit the shoulder and fought to control the bike. I crammed the wheel sharply right again, but this time I stomped the brakes to the floor, throwing the car into a broadside skid momentarily.

No choice, he had to swerve hard right, but he was out of road. The bike lurched as it hit the grass beyond the shoulder then skidded into a slide, tearing up the turf until it hooked on something and went airborne. I glimpsed the rider tumbling along the shoulder like a rag doll. Then I lost sight of him in the dust and was too busy wrestling the car back on the highway to worry about him.

Boone was well ahead of us now, and he jammed his brakes, wheeled his machine around in a U-turn, and headed straight at us, wielding his chain like a flail.

I was out of options. I was moving too slowly to try to avoid him, and if he swung at us as he passed on either side . . .

I swerved off the road into a field, bumping and bucking over the turf, fighting to keep the car from going over. And to keep it moving. If I stopped he'd have us, but I'd glimpsed a building up ahead. A curio stand in the middle of nowhere.

We didn't make it. The left front wheel dropped into a hole and we lurched to a dead stop. I sat there a moment, my head ringing, stunned by the impact. The roar of the motorcycle snapped me out of it. Boone had howled past when I veered off, but he was U-turning to come back again.

"Are you okay?" I shouted at Corey, unsnapping his seatbelt. He was too dazed to answer. I grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him out, carrying him bodily as I stumbled through the underbrush toward Fereau's shack.

Boone had an easier run. He raced along the road, then turned off and roared up the long driveway, skidding to a halt just as Dolph Fereau stepped out of his shop. Boone vaulted off the bike and stalked towards us, carrying his chain. And then he stopped, abruptly. Bitch from Hell moved between us, eyeing everyone but Fereau with equal distaste.

"Now everybody just cool off a minute," Dolph said. "What the hell's going on here?"

"This crazy bitch ran down my friend!" Boone shouted, starting to circle around the cross-wolf toward us.

"Which friend?" Dolph asked. "That Vasco guy you run with? The biker from Pontiac?"

Boone stopped, startled.

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"Yeah, I know who he is," Dolph continued reasonably. "Know who you are too. What'd you figure, couple of punks like you come up to the sticks to lay low, and the locals wouldn't notice? Hell, sonny, we got nothin' else to talk about. Now I don't know what happened to your buddy, but if he's really hurt like you say, maybe you'd best go back and check on him. It may take a few minutes for the law to get here."

"The law?" Boone echoed, swallowing. "What law?"

"I dialed 911 when I seen the lady run off the road," Dolph said. "Sheriff's on his way."

"You stupid old fart," Boone said, turning on him. "You just made the biggest mistake of your life."

"Not as big as the one you just made," Dolph said, as Bitch from Hell moved towards Boone, growling deep in her throat. Boone froze. Fereau reached through the door of his shack and came out with a shotgun, double-barreled. "You got no manners, Mr. Boone," he said, holding the gun casually, aimed at the ground. "Now you get your bike off my place in the next five seconds or I'm gonna blow it to hell and you can walk back to town. And if you mouth off to me one more time, you might be walkin' with a limp. If you can walk at all. You hear what I'm sayin'?"

Boone's glasses flicked from the shotgun to the dog, and back to Fereau. He swallowed, then backed off and swung aboard his cycle. "I'll be back," he shouted over the roar of the bike.

Fereau didn't answer. Boone roared out of the long driveway, and headed away from town. And his fallen friend.

"A real sweetheart," Fereau said, shaking his head. "You two all right?"

I nodded mutely, too shaken to speak.

"What happened in town? You find Frank's place, and maybe rattled Boone's cage?"

"Something like that," I managed, feeling Corey all over to make sure he was in one piece. He squirmed away from me. "What was all that about, anyway?" I asked.

"With Boone?" Fereau said. "Ah, hell, him and his brain-dead buddy came up here last spring, moved in with Emma. He's some kinda kin to her, I guess. Anyway, the two city boys started plantin' marijuana patches on state land. Big secret. Half the folks in this county hunt or trap for part of their livin'. Word was out on those two from day one. I imagine Boone's got some weed stashed at the house. I'm sorry I let you walk into that. I was just so . . . surprised

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when you showed up. I didn't think about those two bein' there until after you left. I woulda called, but I ain't got no phone."

"No phone?" I said. "You mean the police aren't coming?"

"Nah, I lied about that. Local law's kinda thin up here."

"I see," I said. "In that case I appreciate what you did for us just now even more."

"No charge. It was probably my fault you got into trouble."

"Why? Because you didn't warn me about Boone? Or because you didn't tell me the truth about my grandfather?"

He eyed me a moment without speaking. His face was a mask, as lifeless as one of his carvings, ridged and shadowed in the fading light.

"Mr. Fereau, I think Emma lied to me about my grandfather. And I think you did too. But I don't know why. Why would either of you lie to me about Frank?"

"Boy," he said quietly to Corey, "why don't you wait out here, keep an eye peeled, case Mr. Boone comes back. I got something for your mama."

I followed Fereau into his shop. There was no light but the last golden glow of dusk through the window. He laid the shotgun on the counter and picked up a paper-wrapped parcel.

"Your bear," he said, tossing it to me. "You forgot it when you left this morning."

"Thank you," I said. "That's not what I came for."

"I know," he said quietly. "Look, I want you to understand something. Frank d'Hubert and I grew up together, boy and man, friends our whole lives. So when I realized who you were this morning, and you said Madeline died havin' you, I thought Frank might be in serious trouble over it. I knew about the argument him and Maddy had, but I didn't know what happened . . . afterwards."

"It was a lot more than an argument," I said flatly. "She was pregnant and he roughed her up. He may even have caused her death."

"You don't know that for certain, lady. Let it be. Whatever happened, it was over a long time ago."

"Not for me. It didn't even begin for me until today. If she was your mother, could you let it go?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe not."

"Then tell me what's going on. Where is Frank now?"

"I don't know for sure. Canada, maybe. He's got Anishnabe relatives in Ontario, near Nipigon, or maybe Lac Seul. Might be he's up there."

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"His wife said he'd be back in a few weeks."

"I don't think so. For one thing, Emma ain't his wife, not legally, anyway. She was just livin' with him before he went off. I expect she lies about him coming back so she can keep the house, maybe cash his Social Security checks. But I don't think he'll come back here."

"Then I guess I'll have to go to Canada."

"Why? You'd never find him up there. There's a dozen different Ojibway towns and half those people don't even speak English, just French or Anishnabe."

"I speak a little French," I said, "and you speak whatever it is. Maybe you could help me. I'd pay you."

"No," he said. "What's the point?"

"To know the truth, if nothing else. Look, I don't know much about my family. I'd like the little I do know to be true."

"Truth," he snorted. "Now there's a word. When I carve an animal I try to make it as true as I can, but I don't show the fleas, or the mange, or old scars. Maybe that means my carvin' ain't absolutely true, but I don't think it's the worse for it. Truth doesn't always make things better. A lotta times, things that are true, you kinda wish they weren't."

"Like what?" I said. "What are you trying to tell me?"

He looked away a moment, and in the shadowed room, his face was a mystery. Unreadable. "Your father was Shannon Mitchell, wasn't he?"

I nodded.

"Thought so. I met him the winter Frank worked with him. Ex-soldier, just back from Viet Nam. Nice young fella, but kind of wild. Had some hard bark on him, from the war I guess. I didn't know him well, though. Was he a pretty good hunter?"

"Hunter?" I said, puzzled. "No, he never hunted. I mean, he did as a boy, but never after the war. He said he lost his taste for it. Why?"

"Then I must be wrong," Fereau said. "I thought I saw him in Anawhey that fall. Woulda been a month or so after your mother left. I barely recognized him. He looked different. Had a beard, and his eyes were . . . empty. He was in hunting clothes, you know, camouflage? He was at the sporting goods shop. He bought ammunition. I spoke to him but he walked by me like I wasn't there. I never saw him again."

I stared up at him, trying to read his eyes.

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"I never saw Frank again after that fall either," he continued. "I thought after his trouble with Maddy, he'd maybe gone north for a while. That he'd come back sometime, or at least I'd hear from him. But I never have. Not in all these years."

I tried to speak, but nothing came.

"Let it go, lady," he said softly. "Don't go up to that north country. You won't find any answers there."

Suddenly my eyes were stinging. I turned and walked blindly toward the door. And blundered into Corey. He was standing in the shadow of the doorway, listening. And from the dazed look of him, I knew he'd been there all along.

"He could be wrong, you know," I said. We were driving south on 95 in a rented Chevy Cavalier. Repairs on the Escort would take days and I couldn't wait. It was late now, nearly midnight. There'd been a motel in Anahwey, but I was too restless to sleep. Or maybe I just didn't want to sleep there.

"Wrong about what?" Corey said at last. It was the first thing he'd said since we'd given the local sheriff our statements about Boone.

"He could be wrong about seeing my father that fall. It was a long time ago."

"I don't think he was wrong," he said in that coolly rational tone of his. "He seems to be pretty good at faces."

"Yes," I admitted. "I guess he is. And he was right about truth, too. Sometimes maybe it's better not to know."

"No," Corey said positively. "I've been thinking about it, and I think he's wrong about that. It's better to know."

"Is it? Why?"

"Because if we don't know about things, then we're stuck with our programs. Like geese."

"What?"

"Geese," he repeated, annoyed. "They know where to fly in the winter when they're born. It's not something they learn."

"You've lost me," I said.

"Animals are already programmed to do certain things when they're born, kind of like computers. Geese know where to fly, wolves are afraid of fire even if they've never seen it before."

I nodded. "I see. And what are we programmed for?"

"Trouble, I guess," he said. "Your mother had trouble with her father. You didn't get along with yours. And here we are."

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"Right," I said. "Here we are." I glanced at him, but he was looking out into the blackness beyond his window. Miles away.

"We're not them, you know," he said at last. "We're smarter."

"Speak for yourself," I said.

"No, we really are," he insisted. "We know what happened to them. That makes a difference."

"Different how?" I said.

"Suppose I don't go back to boarding school," he said abruptly. "If I stay with you, can I have a dog?"

"No," I said.

"I can't have a dog?"

"No. Look, you're my son, and I love you. But we don't seem to get along very well. And after what we've learned today, I'm not even sure we can. Maybe our programs don't match or something. So. I want you to stay with me, more than anything. But I won't bribe you to do it. You'll have to make up your own mind."

He nodded, digesting it. With perfect logic, no doubt. And I wondered if I'd ever understand him.

"Okay," he said. "I don't want to go back to school. I want to stay with you. I'll go to school here. If that's all right with you."

"Good," I said. I blinked and the road ahead blurred for a moment. "I'd like that."

"So, can we have a dog?"

"Maybe," I said. "What kind of dog?"

"They're kind of expensive. Eight hundred dollars for a male."

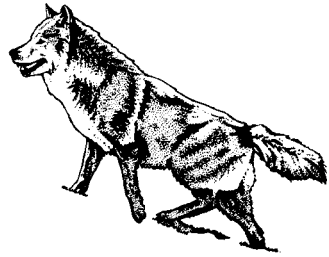
"A cross-wolf, you mean?"

He nodded, with a trace of uncertainty.

"It won't have a pedigree, you know," I said.

"I know. Does that matter so much?"

"I hope not," I said.



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DETECTIVERSES

FELINE FELON

by BOB PERKINS

Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?
I've been in Folsom, doing seven-to-ten.
Too hard, too dangerous, not enough dough
To smuggle in catnip from Mexico.

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AT EIGHTEEN DOLLARS A COPY

by MARY MULLEN

I went to a bookstore today
And saw many thrillers there lay.
With such a profusion
Of theft and collusion
Who can say that crime doesn't pay?

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MOTHER GOOSE NURSERY CRIMES VI

Humpty Dumpty

by GLORIA ROSENTHAL

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's lawyers
Received the king's call:
"Sue that builder for building a very cheap wall!"

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MINUTE MYSTERY

THE VICTIM

by NAN MIX

He saw the single flame. It was hot. He sat frozen with fear. He was strapped to the chair. They were all around him and he knew they planned to harm him. There was a big group of them. They were chanting the same words over and over. They wore identical dark costumes with silver disks over their hearts. Suddenly, there was a hushed silence, a gust of hot wind, and the flame went out. He struggled, but he couldn't move. He now knew, for the first time in his life, pure terror.

They were now silent and staring at him. Then he saw her—the one with the big knife. She wore a golden helmet on her head. As she stepped closer and closer, her eyes looked bigger and bigger. She was laughing. He screamed. She kept coming. As she raised the knife and prepared to cut, someone spoke.

"Our captain's son doesn't seem to be enjoying his first birthday cake does he?" said the police sergeant as he placed the golden paper party hat on the birthday boy's head.

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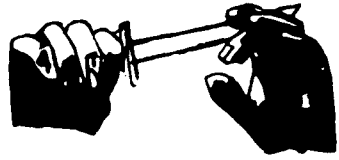

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DETECTIVERSE

ENOUGH

by KATHERINE H. BROOKS

Said the dentist, "Remember, your jaw will be sore"—
  he'd extracted a molar ten minutes before—
"Just gargle with salt till the pain goes away,
  take plenty of aspirin and HAVE A NICE DAY!"

I dashed to the bank when he gave me the bill,
  to check on what money was left in the till,
And they said, when I tried to replenish my dough,
  "DO HAVE A NICE DAY, but your balance IS low."

At lunch when the waiter created a mess
  by spilling spaghetti all over my dress,
Then looked for a tip, I responded, "NO WAY,"
  and he coldly suggested I have a nice day.

The trooper who later detained me for speed,
  though his radar and I, from the start, disagreed,
Disgustedly gave me a ticket to pay,
  then sneered in my face and said, "HAVE A NICE DAY!"

When at last I got home in a frenzy of hate,
  a collector of bills tried to open my gate,
And I ran for the pistol I kept near my bed,
  positioned myself, with a bead on his head,
Then opened the window and blasted away,
  and as he expired I said, "HAVE A NICE DAY!"

Now I'm sitting in prison and scheduled to die,
  confused and repentant and wondering why,
And dreading the fact that the warden might say,
  "Are there any last words? Well then—HAVE A NICE DAY!"

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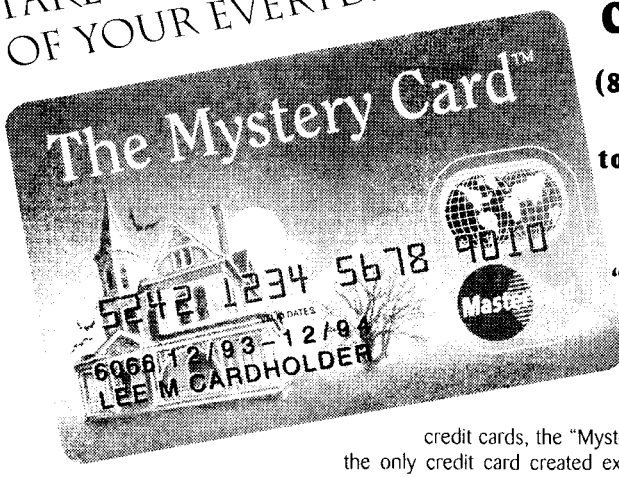

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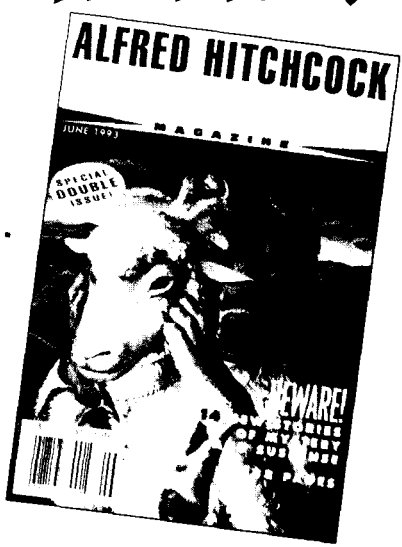

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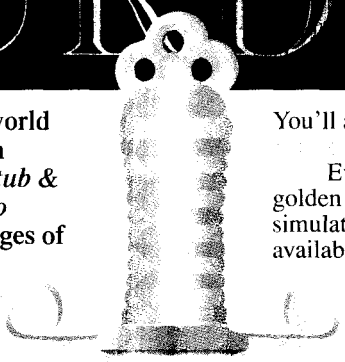

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